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Becoming Who We Are:  
Personal Morphogenesis and Social Change

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in Sociology

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## **Declaration**

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

Initial formulations of some ideas contained in this thesis have previously been presented on my personal web blog (<http://www.markcarrigan.net>) and in Carrigan, M. (2010) 'Realism, Reflexivity, Conflation, and Individualism' *Journal of Critical Realism* 9(3): 384-96.

## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the relationship between personal change and social change, in order to theorise the former in a way amenable to better understanding the latter. It initially proceeds through a detailed critical engagement with the work of Antony Giddens on late modernity, arguing that in spite of its popularity and influence this account suffers from defects which only become apparent when the ideas offered are used to make sense of research data. Grounded in this critical analysis, the present project develops an account of ‘personal morphogenesis’: an analytical framework for studying processes of personal change in a sociological manner. This is developed and refined through a longitudinal case study which followed a varied cohort of undergraduate students through their first two years at university.

## Chapter 1. Personhood and Social Change

What is a person? Such a question is often assumed to fall outside the remit of sociology, instead being a matter of philosophy, anthropology or natural science. Yet any sociological claim, in so far as it unavoidably includes persons amongst its object referents, entails assumptions about the characteristics of those persons. Therefore, as Christian Smith puts it, ‘the better we understand the human, the better we should explain the social’ (Smith 2010). However sociological discussion of ‘persons’ remains contentious for reasons which could easily constitute a thesis in their own right<sup>1</sup>. Nonetheless, something analogous to the person is a recurrent meta-categorical feature of sociological discourse; explaining away the putative causal powers of the person necessitates recognition of the category itself, perhaps going some way to explaining the tendency for the properties and powers so trenchantly denied to creep back in (Archer 2000: 1-50)<sup>2</sup>. An ontological defence of personhood would, as with the intellectual history of disputes surrounding it, represent a different project from that undertaken here<sup>3</sup>. The issue addressed in this thesis is paradoxically more specific and yet more general: what are the implications of how we conceptualise ‘persons’<sup>4</sup> for how we study social change? To this end it takes the

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<sup>1</sup> Such an investigation would be a matter for the history of ideas, considering how sociology served to demarcate itself from psychology in its initial intellectual and social context, the politics of humanism/anti-humanism and the centrality of the category to methodological individualism/holism debates. These themes are explored further in the final chapter of this thesis. Archer (1995, 2000), Sayer (2011) and Smith (2010) all contribute, in slightly different ways, to the position being taken in relation to this underlying intellectual context.

<sup>2</sup> This tendency of matters theoretically repudiated to return via the backdoor is not unique to this issue, as adroitly demonstrated in Mouzelis (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Moreover it would be one which Archer (2000) and Smith (2010) have each already completed.

<sup>4</sup> The term will be used without scare quotes from this point onwards. As shall become clear, the position adopted in this project is a relational realist one (Archer 2012, Donati 2010) but it is important to signpost the fact that the meta-theoretical analysis of the meta-category of

work on late modernity by Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) as its foil, treating it as emblematic of a broader trend within contemporary social theory<sup>5</sup>. Metaphors abound readily within this now canonical literature (Archer 2013a, Outwaite 2009) as all manner of empirical phenomena are incorporated into a dazzlingly panoramic frame of reference and presented as manifestations of the leading edge of social change. However for all its preoccupation with the new, there is something oddly dated about such work, with its apparent prospectiveness belying underlying continuities with long-standing traditions within British sociology (Savage 2010a, Savage and Burrows 2007). In spite of its self-styled epochal novelty, it can easily be read as a peculiarly a priori manifestation of a much broader preoccupation with ‘endings’ within contemporary sociology (Crow 2005). On such a view, the popularity of this work constitutes a puzzle which demands explanation and the opening chapter of this thesis aims to provide precisely this.

No matter what inadequacies we take to inhere in this body of work, it is crucial to counterbalance critique with recognition of the value that manifold researchers have found within it (Smart 2009). In an important way this work serves as a conduit linking a range of sociological sub-disciplines, ensuring that they can, at least in principle, be reincorporated in a substantive way into the same intellectual typology. This, if nothing else, renders it significant in a broader context of ‘increasing specialisation focused primarily on individual substantive problem areas’ (C. Turner 2010: 30) allied to a degree of disciplinary fragmentation not witnessed in

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the individual/person/subject can be detached from the substantive claims about personhood argued for in this thesis and assumed in the wider literature that supports it.

<sup>5</sup> As will be discussed, this is partly a matter of this work having more theoretical depth than some of the comparable accounts of social change. Furthermore, subjectivity, if not personhood per se, is theorised more explicitly in Giddens than in Beck et al.

other ‘exporter’ disciplines (Holmwood 2010a, 2010b, 2011a)<sup>6</sup>. But the Giddensian treatment of late modernity is nonetheless indicative of a ‘kind of sociology which does not seek to define its expertise in terms of its empirical research skills, but in terms of its ability to provide an overview of a kind that is not intended to be tested by empirical research’ (Savage and Burrows 2007: 12). In spite of this ambiguous position in relation to empirical research, this influential literature makes ambitious and wide-ranging claims about what it is like to be a person under contemporary social conditions. It contends that there has been an epochal change which leaves people ‘continuously confronted with a plurality of uncertain life course options’ such that life becomes a ‘reflexive project’ and ‘individuals are continuously forced to organize the future and reconstruct their own biographies in light of rapidly changing information and experiences’ (Mills 2007: 67-68). What makes this account of late modernity so interesting as a foil through which to explore these issues is how explicitly its account of social change unfolds at the level of individual persons<sup>7</sup>. However it is far from unique in its concern for what C. Wright Mills described as ‘the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and the world’ (Mills 2000: 4).

Within this frame of reference, issues which have tended to be seen as matters for philosophical anthropology instead come to seem distinctly sociology. What is it like to be a person now? In different ways, under different descriptions, this has been a recurrent theme within sociological thought. However it is a question

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<sup>6</sup> As Scott (2005) memorably puts it, albeit while characterising a position he does not unanimously agree with, ‘sociology may, on occasion, serve as a “midwife” to new areas of investigation that do not yet form separate disciplines. However, these specialisms will eventually mature and leave home to start a life of their own’. The detraditionalisation thesis represents, as it were, an incitement for the emergent sub-disciplines to, on occasion, return home for a visit and, furthermore, for there to be something of mutual interest to talk about when they do.

<sup>7</sup> As well as, it shall be argued, the inadequacy with which this is enacted.



which often eludes the grasp of those who orientate themselves towards it. It is an empirical question posed at a level of generality which precludes an empirical answer. Treating it in an empiricist manner, working straight-forwardly towards an ‘answer’ through the accumulation of data, soon collapses the panoramic frame of reference which accounts for the lure of the question. Instead, we must focus our attention on the interplay itself and, in doing so, the question of the person comes to the fore. How do we conceptualise the interplay between ‘biography and history’? How do we make meta-theoretical sense of the question itself?

This thesis takes what may appear to be an oblique route towards addressing the issue. The first section engages with the work of Giddens on late modernity, situating it within a broader tradition of sociological thought and identifying the conceptual and empirical problems which characterise it. The source of these problems is located within the Giddensian subject; more specifically the inadequate conceptualisation of reflexivity underlying it. It is argued that this has important implications for how social change is conceptualised in this body of work, which is particularly significant given the widespread tendency for social researchers to draw upon it as a theoretical resource to make sense of empirical data. An alternative theoretical framework is then introduced, using Archer’s (2003, 2007, 2012) account of relational reflexivity and drawing on Alford’s (1995) notion of personal morphogenesis<sup>8</sup> to better address the issue of how to conceptualise the changes undergone by persons and their relationship to wider social and cultural changes. This conceptual apparatus is, as with the morphogenetic approach more broadly, focused upon the analysis of change over time (Archer 1995). The virtues of such an approach are illustrated through a critical engagement with the Giddensian

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<sup>8</sup> In this sense Alford’s (1995) work, as well as the present thesis, applies Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic approach to the level of individual persons.

equivalent, which looks to identify the ‘fateful moments’ which structure biographies.

The second section presents an empirical case study, a mixed-methods project conducted over two years, which was used to develop and refine ‘personal morphogenesis’ as an analytical framework. The biographies of the participants, undergraduate university students across a number of departments<sup>9</sup>, are presented typologically to analyse convergent and divergent tendencies in their trajectory into and through university. Then four detailed case studies are presented, addressing the same question: how did each subject become the person they were at the time the fieldwork ended? In each case, cycles of personal morphogenesis are delineated and analysed, with the intention of offering causal explanations of biographical trajectories without abstracting away from what mattered to the persons concerned and the role this played in engendering the direction which it took (Sayer 2011).

The final section synthesises the meta-theoretical analysis and the empirical case study to offer a concluding statement of ‘personal morphogenesis’ as an analytical toolkit for the analysis of change at the level of individual persons. Though informed by a philosophical account of personhood, its primary status is intended to be analytical; offering a framework within which the temporal sequencing of different causal factors engendering processes of change and stability can be teased out, as well as a number of conceptual tools to make sense of their interplay. The thesis concludes with a pre-emption of some objections which may be raised to this approach and a discussion of the substantive problem areas to which it could be fruitfully applied.

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<sup>9</sup> These were recruited from a larger sample who completed the ICONI survey instrument developed by Archer (2007).

## **Late Modernity and the Post-Traditional Order**

‘What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour.’ (Giddens 1991: 70)

It is a central tenet of Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992, 1994) that, under conditions of late modernity, the existential dimension to human life has undergone a radical transformation. Global forces have reshaped emotional life, with a number of interconnected processes having rendered long-standing existential orientations inadequate for navigating a rapidly changing social world. Giddens (1991, 1994) refers to this process reshaping late modern life as detraditionalisation and, alongside the work of Bauman (1991, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2008) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), his writing on this topic has exercised an immense influence over many areas of social inquiry. Adams (2005) suggests that Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) and Gergen (1991) could also be meaningfully included in this body of work. So too could Sennett (1998, 2007) and Young (2007). These original texts, as well as the literature they have spawned, claim that under conditions of late modernity, ‘processes of “individualization” ... undermine and dissolve old constraints that bound people to certain lifestyles and open up many areas of life to personal choice’ (Howard 2007: 1). While the relationship between the concepts of ‘detraditionalisation’ and ‘individualisation’ is unclear, prompting authors such as Smart (2007) to use the terms synonymously, this textual issue largely stems from the wider question of differences between the approaches of the various

individualisation theorists and is of no great concern for the purposes of the present chapter. Pilkington (2007) considers that Beck and Giddens have different emphases but are mutually compatible. Elchardus and De Keere (2010) suggest that individualisation is understood within this literature to be the outcome of detraditionalisation. While the textual basis of this claim is unclear, it is a helpful way in which to approach a body of work which, whatever its virtues, lacks rigour and consistency. In this thesis I choose to focus on the predominately Giddensian notion of detraditionalisation, understood as the process transforming personal life in late modernity, rather than individualisation because the claims made about the latter are, as will be discussed, so conceptually muddled and empirically questionable that systematically addressing them would risk distraction from the much more interesting process from which these are purported to emerge as outcomes. Furthermore detraditionalisation has been written about in the literature with a greater degree of conceptual clarity, while individualization has often functioned as a catch-all phrase under which an array of distinct, though related, claims have been subsumed.

While the ensuing discussion engages solely with Giddens, it does so from a position of principled charity, with his work being seen as the exemplar of a broader body of work in relation to which similar, though not identical, arguments could be made to those advanced in this chapter. Furthermore, the substantial and sophisticated body of Giddens' social theory provides a frame of reference which permits a more incisive interrogation of his work on social change than would be possible with any of the other comparable authors, with the potential exception of Bauman. The textual critique of Giddens is intended to establish a broader point about a pervasive trend within contemporary sociology which would, nonetheless,

require further textual justification if the claim were to be sustained in relation to specific authors. Nonetheless, this chapter draws on a secondary literature which does not delineate the field in this way and, as such, at points work is cited that is directed towards another author yet deployed in this chapter as part of a critique of Giddens and the wider trend in relation to which his work is being treated as emblematic. Rather than litter the text with perpetual statements of interpretative scope, this chapter proceeds on the simpler basis of excluding arguments which are only applicable to the theorist at whom they were original aimed. So, for instance, critiques addressed to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim are included, if any, only if they have a broader purchase within this wider body of work.

Within what Giddens (1991) calls a 'post-traditional order', tradition has an ever-declining purchase upon our internal deliberations about what to do and who to be. While modernity and tradition have always been opposed, the former has tended to rebuild the latter: the creative destruction of capitalism erodes tradition with one hand while creating opportunities for its renewal with the other (Giddens 1994). For instance industrialisation radically transformed traditional labour practices while also creating conditions within which individual workers are able to struggle towards the amelioration of their shared conditions and, through doing so, breeds new traditions of collective action. So while, in a sense, the notion of detraditionalising processes can be seen as implicit to classic modernisation theory, this stands as what Heelas (1996) calls 'co-existence theorising': seeing detraditionalisation as taking place alongside, or together with, the construction of new traditions. In contrast the contemporary notion of detraditionalisation is a 'radical thesis', asserting a break or rupture with modernity: in Giddens' (1991b: 175) terms, 'the radical turn from tradition intrinsic to modernity's reflexivity makes a break ... with preceding social

eras'. The radical change being claimed rests not on the erosion of tradition per se but rather on the absence of distinctively modern traditions which arise in their place (Heiskala 2011). Heelas (1996: 3) argues that radical theories of detraditionalisation conceptualise the changes they describe in terms of oppositions:

fate (or the pre-ordained) v. choice (or reflexivity); necessity v. contingency; certainty v. uncertainty; security v. risk. Differentiated (or organized) culture v. the de-differentiated (or disorganized); the embedded (situated or socio-centric) self v. the disembedded (de-situated or autonomous); self under control v. self in control; and virtues v. preferences (with values coming in between)

In general terms, the substantive claims made concerning detraditionalisation take the form of asserting the temporal transition from the former to the latter: in a post-traditional order, fate becomes choice, certainty becomes uncertainty, security becomes risk etc. At this early stage, the empirical weaknesses of such accounts become evident, as the claims made seem, on the most charitable interpretation, to be overstatements. As Heiskala (2011: 12) observes, these stark oppositions obscure 'manifold continuities between societies placed on the opposite sides of the line of transformation'. Crow (2005) makes a similar point in his warning that 'much is lost when complex analyses are reduced to the stark opposition of change or continuity'. Alexander (1995: 44-5) accuses Giddens of restaging the alternatives of modernisation theory in an 'even more arbitrary way'. The conceptual edifice upon which detraditionalisation is founded begins to look distinctly questionable when considered critically.

While this thesis is critical of the detraditionalisation literature, it is important to recognise the extent of this literature's influence, particularly within sociological subdisciplines. The literature is popular, suggest Savage and Burrows (2007: 7), because it is 'the kind of sociological theorizing that presents synthetic accounts of social change' which are 'interesting to a (relatively) wide audience' and 'keep sociology in the public eye'. Though some have argued that the apparent timeliness of the literature simply reflects it having taken for granted what are, fundamentally, social assumptions of late capitalist society (Brannen and Nilsen 2005, Carrigan 2010). These ideas should be understood in terms of a much longer tradition of modernisation theory within sociology (Heiskala 2011) particularly within the British context, where theoretical engagement with the contours of social change has a particular disciplinary significance (Savage 2010b). In this sense, we can understand the detraditionalisation thesis as a form of neo-modernisation theory (Alexander 1995) which has had a broader impact in substantive areas of inquiry. As Smart (2007: 24) observes, this body of work has 'injected debate and excitement into the field of families, intimacy and relationships' (see also Heaphy [2007], Roseneil and Budgeon [2004], Roseneil [2000, 2007]). A similar degree of influence can be seen within Youth Studies, including for example Dillabough and Kennelly (2010), France (2007), Green (2009) and Jones (2009). This influence is far from uniform in its effects and some of the ensuing work is admirably critical, nonetheless there is a discernible pattern: researchers recurrently find some degree of conceptual or ideational value within this body of work. But it is questionable whether this outweighs the difficulties which ensue when concepts from the literature are used operationally. For instance Brannen and Nilsen (2005: 412) observe how the 'de-contextualised nature of the arguments upon which the individualisation thesis rests'

lead to ensuing ‘difficulties attached to making use of its concepts for analytical purposes in empirical research’. But while there are undoubtedly serious problems with detraditionalisation theory, which will be the subject of much of this chapter, it occupies an important place in the sociological canon (Outwaite 2009). Smart (2007) offers an engaging attempt to theorise the role which such approaches can play vis-à-vis empirical research. Similarly Lundby (2009: 141) writes that,

[W]ith their approach to individualization, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim outline an explanation of the present social change that cannot be proven by any single survey. Rather, we have to understand their theory of individualization as a meta approach that makes it possible to integrate very different results of surveys and qualitative investigations into an overall coherent understanding.

On this account, such ‘a “meta-process” cannot be researched empirically as a single transformation phenomenon. Notwithstanding, only the formulation of theories of “meta-processes” allow us to structure the complexity of different empirical data to get a deeper understanding of occurring (long-term) processes of change’ (Lundby 2009: 140-1). While it is rare to find such an explicit statement of theoretical methodology within the late modernity literature, it is my contention that a similar understanding is implicit within much of the work within the field. It is precisely this integrative function which would, if not for the deleterious condition of contemporary sociological theory (Mouzelis 1995), be performed by conceptual tools which had been expressly designed for the task at hand. Unfortunately, for reasons which will occupy the next section of this chapter, the late modernity



literature is chronically ill suited to meet the needs to which it is recurrently applied.

Heiskala (2011) argues that the modernisation perspective more broadly (with the late modernity literature representing a last display of life in an otherwise moribund intellectual tradition) has been increasingly superseded by a shift to a spatial, rather than temporal, globalisation perspective. But aspects still linger on as ‘something like a family secret’ which ‘most sociologists use’ as a ‘background understanding’. It retains value as a ‘useful tool for framing research questions’ and ‘contributing to the diagnosis of the era’, facilitating broad introductory accounts which can then be studied empirically using other approaches (Heiskala 2011: 14). It is precisely this continued use as a ‘frame of orientation’ which necessitates that we understand how and why it serves this purpose, as well as the practical consequences which flow from it. The attitude this thesis adopts towards this body of work is that which Giddens himself adopted towards functionalism: ‘it is essential to understand the attractions [...] while still holding that conceptually its influence has been largely pernicious’ (Giddens 1984: xxxi).

Much of the empirical work that draws upon the late modernity literature stands in the relation to it that Heiskala (2011) suggests, drawing upon it as a conceptual framework through which to pose research questions and contextualise empirical data. This emerges quite naturally from the fact that, as Reed and Alexander (2009: 24) express it, ‘Giddens’ idea of “late modernity” could organise myriad case studies’. This is equally true of the work of Bauman and Beck. Brannen and Nilsen (2005: 413) suspect that often ‘the theory is imported at the analysis phase of the research in order to make generalisations across cases rather than being applied to distinguish differences between cases’. If this is true then it compounds a broader conceptual tendency within the literature to obliterate empirical difference,

as astutely recognised in Crossley's (2004, 2005, 2006) critique of the treatment of the body by such authors, something which leaves it fascinatingly at odds with the expressed ethical commitments of Bauman (1991, 1997) in particular.

My initial concern in this chapter will be to offer a charitable account of detraditionalisation as a process linking either side of the dichotomies understood to constitute the specificity of late modernity. As a starting point for this endeavour, Heelas (1996: 2) provides a working definition of detraditionalisation:

As a working definition, detraditionalization involves a shift of authority: from 'without' to 'within'. It entails the decline of the belief in pre-given or natural orders of things. Individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority in the face of the disorder and contingency which is thereby generated. 'Voice' is displaced from established sources, coming to rest with the self.

Analytically therefore is it possible to distinguish structural, cultural and agential aspects of this purported process. Changes are taking place at each level and, furthermore, each set of changes is taken to relate to each of the others. However, much of the literature on late modernity tends to be clearer about the outcomes of this process, rather than the nature of the process itself. For instance Hopper (2003: 29) writes that detraditionalisation encompasses a 'number of developments and processes ... that each in some way challenge traditions and traditional forms of authority'. He suggests that when we examine such institutions (naming 'organized religion, political authority, class, the family and other forms of common life') we find that 'in a variety of ways the relevance of these traditional institutions appears

to be waning, and with it their authority and status' (Hopper 2003: 29). By way of empirical example Hopper cites, inter alia, declining church attendance as an example of detraditionalisation at work with regards to a traditional institution. The use of the adjective 'traditional' here is problematic, in so far as it operationalises tradition as that which is experiencing a decline and, as a consequence, the description lacks substantive content: it presupposes the linear trajectory it purports to substantiate, such that alternative interpretations (declining church attendance signifying a transformation rather than a diminution of religious practice) are squeezed out by definitional fiat. It is in this sense that the detraditionalisation thesis represents a striking example of what Taylor (2007: 22) calls a 'subtraction story': grand accounts which explain processes by which 'human beings have lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge'. As well as being conceptually problematic, the understanding of 'tradition' within the literature is also empirically dubious and politically questionable. Adams (2005) observes that,

It is a common cliché to imagine the Victorian self as bound by strict civil codes, obsessed with manners, hierarchy and social position, whilst in thrall to scientific rationalism, Reason, and the repressive caricature of selfhood all these factors combined to encourage. Accounts of post-traditional theorists may not be so coarse in their portrayal, but as has been suggested already, its advocates rarely consider any historical period in enough detail to produce meaningful portraits of experience, stereotyped or otherwise. (Adams 2005: 5)

He draws on historical literature utilising primary sources to suggest that many of the claims made about life in late modern society, were in fact widely experienced characteristics of life in early modern societies prior to detraditionalisation. He argues that ‘the assumptions the detraditionalization thesis make about “traditional societies” are [...] dangerously simplistic’. Furthermore ‘at best there is an oversimplification of subjectivity in accounting not just for our ancestors, but for others in the present’ while ‘at worst it reflects a remarkable degree of cultural superiority and arrogance, claiming that we are the first and only ones to free ourselves from an habitual adherence to the shackles of culture; to finally confront our own selves with perspicuity, whilst our ancestors remained entranced by the veils of tradition’ (Adams 2005: 14-15). This vacuous notion of tradition obscures the more pertinent aspects of the late modernity literature. Leaving this issue aside for now, the concrete example of declining church attendance allows us to identify the three aspects referred to above<sup>10</sup>:

Structure	Culture	Agency
Less people regularly participate in organised religion	The authority and status of organised religion declines	The pervasiveness and experienced pertinence of religious ideas declines
Declining participation in traditional institutions	Declining authority and status of traditional institutions	Declining relevance of traditional institutions for the decision-making of individuals

This poses an obvious causal question: can causes and effects be delineated here? Unfortunately the literature on detraditionalisation rarely addresses such questions,

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<sup>10</sup> See Archer (2011) for a detailed overview of the methodological significance of this tripartite distinction.

instead tending to vacillate between the abstract and the concrete; often raising important issues in vivid ways but nonetheless failing to offer a solid grip upon specific processes.

## **Globalisation and Psychic Life**

With the spatial extension of capitalism across the globe modernity enters a new phase, as capitalism's 'pattern of expansionism' has become 'much more decentred as well as more all-enveloping' with an 'overall movement ... towards much greater interdependence' (Giddens 1994: 57). With this comes an 'extraordinary, and still accelerating, connectedness between every-day decisions and global outcomes, together with its reverse, the influence of global orders over individual life' (Giddens 1994: 58). Our increasing awareness of the potentially global ramifications of our actions goes hand-in-hand with a recognition that distant events have an ever growing salience for our deliberations about daily life. Central to much of this discussion is the notion which Giddens (1991) sets out of 'disembedding': the processes through which social activity is 'lifted out' of concrete tracts of space-time<sup>11</sup>. These are 'mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances' (Giddens 1991: 2). In his original account Giddens (1991) identifies two types of disembedding mechanisms: the creation of symbolic tokens and the establishment of expert systems. The former are media of exchange with standardised value (such as money) which serve to 'bracket' time and space through their interchangeability

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<sup>11</sup> Though it is not entirely clear from the texts, it is being assumed here that Giddens sees 'disembedding' mechanisms as causal processes which work to produce the macro-social trend of detraditionalisation and that this constitutes the specificity of life under late modern conditions.

across a range of locales. The latter are institutional deployments of expert knowledge possessing validity which stands independently of the practitioners and clients who use them, encompassing ‘all aspects of social life in conditions of modernity – in respect of the food we eat, the medicines we take, the buildings we inhabit, the forms of transport we use and a multiplicity of other phenomena’ (Giddens 1991: 18). Giddens argues that the abstract characteristics of such systems, in the sense that they inherently elude the particularistic concerns of human life in a concrete locale, necessitates trust: as larger swathes of human life are penetrated by abstract systems, we are forced to trust in processes and knowledge which we neither entirely see nor understand. Under conditions of late modernity, both forms of disembedding mechanisms are taken to increase in their intensity and extension, leading to a profound destabilisation of previously securely reproduced (i.e. ‘traditional’) social relations<sup>12</sup>.

The detraditionalisation thesis argues that ‘destabilizing these social relationships likewise destabilizes the traditions that they embody and the practices that sustain the traditions’ (Carroll 2000: 18). At heart this is a claim about social reproduction: the phenomena subsumed under the term ‘globalisation’ encompass a range of disembedding mechanisms which interrupt the reproduction of ‘tradition’<sup>13</sup>. While this process is seen to be uneven, it is taken to be sufficiently widespread that whatever socio-cultural reproduction persists lacks cohesion to such a degree that the efficacy of tradition quickly erodes. The result is that ‘their authority over us is weakened, and we are thrown back reflexively on the authority of our own

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<sup>12</sup> Hence engendering detraditionalisation.

<sup>13</sup> And constrain the possibility of a reactive ‘reembedding’. This notion that disembedding processes are paralleled by reembedding processes is central to the way in which Bauman, Beck and Giddens understand modernity, with the balance between the two being seen to determine the development dynamics of particular stages of modernisation. This is perceived to culminate in the late modern, liquid modern or second modern stage of ‘disembedding without reembedding’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001).

experience to make the multiple choices that are open to us' (Carroll 2000: 18). Under such conditions, tradition loses its efficacy as a resource for negotiating the social world. It is important to note that the claim made here is about the transition from traditional modernity, where the traditions of pre-modern society have been replaced by distinctively modern traditions, to post-traditional society. So the 'traditions' at stake here are understood to include a diverse range of phenomena: class position, gender, religion, neighbourhood, nationalism, science.

Traditions continue to exist and are, in fact, sometimes rearticulated in the form of religious and political fundamentalisms which attempt to counteract the complexity and ambiguity of life under contemporary capitalism through the cultivation of moral certainty. Nonetheless their role in human life is transformed: they may still exist but 'the signposts of tradition now are blank' (Giddens 1991: 82). Tradition is experienced as problematic and unreliable. Its utility as a guide to action is exhausted and, with that, each individual is thrown back upon their own resources in a confrontation with existential questions which life under global capitalism is posing with ever greater intensity. In this sense globalisation is conceived of as impinging upon the internal life of the subject rather than as simply existing 'out there' in the world. As Elliott and Lemert (2008: 94) argue:

the central conceptual and political limitation of conceptualizing globalization purely as an external force, however, is that it prevents us from seeing with sufficient clarity the myriad ways in which individuals engage, respond, escape, reproduce or transform the whole gamut of globalizing forces that they necessarily encounter in their everyday lives.

On their account, which draws heavily on the work of Giddens, globalisation has constitutively psychic dimensions which are irrevocably obscured by conceptualising the underlying changes in terms of the reorganisation of a social world external to the individual. Their approach to this issue involves a psychoanalytic exploration of the ‘new individualism’ they take to ensue from this process, predicated on an understanding that this process is ‘built upon operations of fantasy and its unconscious contortions – anxieties about difference, about otherness and strangeness, about intimacy and proximity’ (Elliott and Lemert 2008: 73). In a discussion which encompasses a whole array of new social phenomena (‘compulsive consumerism’, ‘cybersex’, ‘therapy culture’ etc.) they repeatedly assert that global forces shape psychic life. However they make little attempt to analyse these phenomena in specific terms, instead simply tracing causal connections (at times an artefact of the fictional vignettes which they effectively treat as empirical data) between the global and the psychic. While an interface between the two is theoretically posited, no intellectual labour is expended in attempting to conceptualise what exactly that interface is or how it might work. The result is that the individual becomes a cipher, with their individuality perpetually stressed, yet somehow lacking any significance. Elliott and Lemert (2008: 56) actually embrace this stance, arguing that ‘in current social circumstances – in which our lives are reshaped by technology-induced globalization and the transformation of capitalism – it is not the particular individuality of an individual that is most important’ but rather the process through which that individuality is produced. Their account presupposes a sparse ontology, with no space between global forces ‘out there’ and psychic life ‘in here’. Without such a space, they prove literally unable to explain the phenomena they investigate with any degree of specificity. Though the book sets out interesting



questions relating to changing human experience, which presumably accounts for at least part of the success it enjoyed, it is systematically unequipped to answer them (Carrigan 2010).

Giddens (1991) similarly draws on psychoanalytical theory but, as I will discuss in the following section, his account is, at least superficially, more plausible. Elliott and Lemert (2008) sought to illuminate the elements of fantasy and trauma they took to be intrinsic to the subject's attempt to negotiate a dangerous social world. Lasch (1985, 1991) offers a much earlier and more competent engagement with these themes and, in view of this, their work should not be regarded as either novel or enlightening. However it is of interest in the context of this chapter because I intend to argue that its underlying deficiency is symptomatic of the late modernity literature more widely. The issue at stake is the interface between the 'global' and the 'personal' which underlies so many of the phenomena which have been deemed pertinent by theorists such as Bauman (2001, 2008), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) and Giddens (1991, 1992). The inadequacy of how this is theorised stands starkly evident in Elliott and Lemert (2008) and this is why I have used it as a first attempt to identify the underlying problem. Through this critical engagement, first with Elliott and Lemert and now with Giddens, the two meta-theoretical questions which animate this thesis becomes clearer: what do theories of social change assume about persons and what are the implications of these assumptions for the analysis of social change?

## **Why Ontology Matters**

Whereas in pre-modern contexts individual conduct - in such crucial areas as

work, marriage, the socialisation of children, entertainment, and so on - was regulated routinely but meaningfully through traditional moral codes, in detraditionalized social contexts all the mechanisms of social regulation extrinsic to the individual become weaker, and people are forced to confront a situation that urgently asks them to make choices, to decide about their career, their lifestyles, their diets, the number of children they wish to have, the way they will raise them and so on. (Mouzelis 1999: 83)

The process of detraditionalisation confronts subjects with a normative vacuum, as the same process which expands the range of personal choice also strips away social and cultural guides to action and erodes the efficacy of those that remain. During the earlier phases of modernity, newly emerged collective forms (the nation, the party, the class) served, at least partially, to replace such lost guidance, offering new certainties to replace those traditional ones which modernisation had undercut. When these are lost, each subject is thrown back upon their own resources, leaving them with two behavioural avenues through which to answer the existential questions posed by life:

In detraditionalised contexts, there are two distinct possibilities in terms of responses to opportunities and anxieties: one is a move towards greater autonomy on the part of the individual, and the other a relapse into some form of compulsive behaviour. (Giddens 1999: 202).

What is curious about this account is the manner in which agency, in the individual rather than collective sense of the term, is seemingly conceived of as an all-or-

nothing phenomena. One is seen to be either a self-monitoring autonomous individual or passively gripped by mindless compulsions<sup>14</sup>. Using anorexia as a case study, Giddens (1991: 105) says that compulsion can be ‘understood as a pathology of reflexive self-control, operating around an axis of self-identity and bodily appearance’. Many compulsions incorporate a reflexive component, at least in the Giddensian sense of self-monitoring, as Giddens describes in relation to a particular auto-ethnographic account of anorexia he analyses:

Her concern to become thin emerged, not as a sudden antipathy towards food, but as a controlled and progressive phenomenon, which happened ‘little by little’; she devoted a great deal of care and concern to her diet, a deliberate asceticism in bodily regime amid the plural choices of food available; there was a marked reflexive component, as signalled by her determination to ‘eat up’ all the information about calories she could obtain; awareness of the need to forge a distinctive lifestyle, in relation to her self-identity, emerges very clearly; and a polarity comes out plainly in the ‘façade’ she sought to construct as contrasted to her eventual conviction that she could ‘nourish’ her self-esteem rather than ‘starve’ it. (Giddens 1991:105-106)

Such a case is seen by Giddens to represent the ‘dark side’ to the increasing reflexivity demanded in late modernity. Confronted by a plethora of options, such that in his pithy formulation ‘one has no choice but to choose’, the subject is encumbered with the emotional burden of reflexivity: the difficulty of knowing what to do and who to be, given the lack of normative guidance in a ‘post-traditional

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<sup>14</sup> This issue is explored further in Chapter Three.

order', as the same process which expands choice also undercuts the availability of authoritative guidance about how to choose. In his view the anorexic represents one extreme, though perpetually possible, response to this predicament: a retreat inwards towards an intense disciplinary regime, such that 'compulsive mastery' supplants 'authentic reflexive monitoring' (Giddens 1991: 107).

Giddens offers his account of reflexivity as a conscious critique of alternative conceptualisations of human agency. He mentions Lasch (1985, 1991) specifically but suggests that a similar view of agency can be found within the work of others who draw comparable conclusions and, in fact, explains what Giddens deems to be the inadequacy of those shared conclusions. He writes that,

[I]n the work of Lasch, and many others who have produced rather similar cultural diagnoses, one can discern an inadequate account of the human agent. The individual appears essentially passive in relation to overwhelming external forces, and a misleading or false view is adopted of the connections between micro-settings of action and more encompassing social influences. (Giddens 1991: 175)

On his account, human agents never passively accept external influences but continually reflect upon and reconstitute them (either reproductively or transformatively) through their action. Though he does not explicitly address the issue in his account of detraditionalisation, given his other theoretical commitments Giddens presumably accepts that the degree of reflection involved in this reconstitution varies at different points in the modernisation process. It follows from his claim that agents actively reproduce and transform external influences that 'it is

not valid to argue that, while the micro-settings of action are malleable, larger social systems form an uncontrolled background environment' (Giddens 1991: 175).

These claims follow naturally from his underlying commitment to structurationist theory which, as Mouzelis (1999: 94) puts it, 'tries to transcend the divide between objectivist sociologies (structural and structuralist) and subjectivist ones (interpretive sociologies)'. To this end Giddens is concerned with the role of practical human action in reproducing structure. However his commitment to the 'duality-of-structure' entails a denial of the relative autonomy of both structure and agency such that the former only become real when instantiated through human activity and the latter only become real (i.e. become persons) when structure is drawn upon to facilitate practice (Archer 1995: 101). Structures are correctly recognised to be activity dependent but this is construed in present tense rather than past tense terms i.e. current structures are taken to be dependent on the activities of current agents rather than the actions of past agents in shaping the structural environment present agents confront (Cruickshank 2010).

Archer (1995: 117) argues that structurationist theory can accommodate features of the human qua actor (e.g. organisational role playing, dynamics within Goffman's interaction situations) but not qua agent or qua person. Human beings are left over-socialised in one respect and under-socialised in another. On such an account it is difficult to see either how collective agents are able to transform structure or how subjects are able to enjoy any independent interiority, because is only through persons that structures exist and only through structures that persons exist as such. Archer (1995) argues that in its denial of any separation between structure and agency, structurationism effectively denies the autonomy of each. As a consequence structurationist approaches are able to identify the interface between

structure and agency but struggle to unpack it i.e. examine the interplay that takes place over time. As Kaspersen (2000: 162) puts it, ‘the theory never produces a concrete analytical instrument with which to grasp the problem’. The result is that it vacillates between voluntarism and determinism, unable to specify when each is more likely than the other. It recognises the existence of an interface between structure and agency, accepting it as crucial for sociological explanation, though remains unable to offer any explanatory purchase upon it.

Before proceeding any further, it is important to note the ambiguous relationship between the earlier and later work of Giddens. It has been suggested by some that the later work of Giddens represents a turn away from his earlier development of the structurationist approach (King 2010, Ritzer 2007). Certainly, there are thematic divergences from this earlier body of work and, while a detailed textual analysis exploring continuities and discontinuities between the Giddens of the 70s/80s and of the 90s is beyond the scope of this thesis<sup>15</sup>, it is maintained that there are substantial continuities. This chapter has treated these two distinct phases of his work in a relatively continuous fashion because of these continuities and also, as an extension of the principle of charity, given that Giddens (1979, 1984) exhibits a sophistication, rigour and engagement in philosophical debates which is lacking in his later work. Furthermore, it will be argued that the explanatory implications of structurationist theory can be seen in the account Giddens gives of human agency within late modern society.

Interestingly, his point of contention with theorists such as Lasch (1979, 1985) has its basis in the passivity he sees them as attributing to human beings,

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<sup>15</sup> Oddly such a project does not seem to have been undertaken, despite the canonical status of Giddens’ work, though of course these questions have been addressed in part on many occasions.

imbuing subjects with no capacity other than defensive adaptation. Yet, as we have seen, Giddens himself recognises the possibility of such passivity, writing at length about the mindless compulsions (i.e. meaningless routine activity) which late modern life gives rise to. In fact in spite of his attempt to defend the reflexive capacities of human agents against critics such as Lasch, Giddens himself denies the efficacy of reasons in relation to motives. He describes the former as an ‘on-going feature of action’ which ‘all competent agents routinely “keep in touch” with ... as an aspect of producing and reproducing that behaviour’. On his view these are ‘not definite “presences” which lurk behind human social activity’ but are instead recursively instantiated as part of that activity itself (Giddens 1979: 39-40). In contrast motives are the ‘wellsprings of action’ which ‘do not impinge chronically on action in the manner in which reasons do’ (Giddens 1991: 63). On such an account reasons become, in effect, incidental to action, consisting in the awareness and understanding which agents are capable of articulating in relation to the practices in which they engage. Discrete intentions are subsumed into a ‘continuous flow of intentionality in time’ which can be fallibly reconstructed in deliberate articulations but only in a manner enabled by a ‘background’ of shared social practices constituting available ‘stocks of knowledge’ (Giddens 1979: 40). He understands the agency of individuals as being constituted in a ‘continuous flow of conduct’ consisting of ‘causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing processes of events-in-the-world’ rather than a ‘series of discrete acts combined together’ (Giddens 1979: 55-6)

Despite his intention to affirm human agency, as well as the strong liberal humanistic impulse which runs through his work on late modernity<sup>16</sup>, Giddens

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<sup>16</sup> See Atkinson (2010) for a critical perspective on this.

nonetheless seems unable to take reflexivity seriously. He certainly stresses the agential capacity for action but, given the dependence of practice upon structural rules and resources, this is not imputing a property to human beings *sui generis*. The capacity he locates in agents (reflexive monitoring) seems irredeemably secondary, in that it is part of practice and unavoidably dependent on it. The agent is taken to have no deliberative faculty independent of that which emerges through practice, at least not one which is possessed of any causal efficacy. As such the reflexivity of the individual becomes analogous to the steering wheel on a car: it can calibrate movement but nothing more. Any inwardly or outwardly articulated explication of why and how the calibration of action is enacted in the manner it is represents an abstraction from the stream of practical awareness in which Giddens locates reflexivity (Giddens 1979: 56). As he describes his understanding of reflexivity:

To be a human being is to be a purposive agent, who both has reasons for his or her activities and is able, if asked, to elaborate discursively upon those reasons (including lying about them). But terms such as ‘purpose’ or ‘intention’, ‘reason’, ‘motive’ and so on have to be treated with caution, since their usage in the philosophical literature has very often been associated with a hermeneutical voluntarism and because they extricate human action from the contextuality of time-space. (Giddens 1984: 3).

In his concern to ‘promote a recovery of the subject without lapsing into subjectivism’ Giddens enacts something homologous to precisely the philosophical sin he imputes to structuralist thought, superficially preserving the ‘reflexive components of human conduct’ but, in effect, constituting that very reflexivity as a



‘sort of epiphenomena of deeper structures’ (Giddens 1979: 47). To be sure, it successfully avoids the view of subject qua vanishing point in precisely the manner it intends; however it does so by subsuming the efficacy of agency under the duality of structure. Reasons become either a matter of the agent’s practical knowledgeability or a discursive matter for the interaction situation, with any sense of reasons as causes of action deliberately abandoned, while motives constituted by ‘the organisation of an actor’s wants’ are seen to ‘straddle conscious and unconscious aspects of cognition and emotion’ (Giddens 1979: 58). As such the causes of action are taken by Giddens to originate at a level ‘below’ that of reflexive monitoring, with the real motivations for action often “‘outside” the range of the self-understanding of the agent’ (Giddens 1979: 59) and ‘tending to have a direct purchase on action only in relatively unusual circumstances, situations which in some way break with the routine’<sup>17</sup>. They ‘supply overall plans [...] within which a range of conduct is enacted’ but ‘much of our day-to-day conduct is not directly motivated’ (Giddens 1984: 6). Any sense that deliberation can proceed in a relatively autonomous fashion, more or less detached from rather than irrevocably tangled up with the social, begins to seem not just obscure but outright impossible from within the Giddensian framework. Within his ontology of the person there is discursive consciousness, practical consciousness and unconscious motivation (Giddens 1984: 7) but not what we might call deliberative consciousness, as something relatively autonomous from the discursive. The onset of detraditionalisation (Giddens 1991) creates more room for deliberation because declining routinisation expands the possibility of ‘direct motivation’ of ‘day-to-day conduct’ but, as will be argued in

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<sup>17</sup> This is an important point to raise against those who see a clear disjuncture between Giddens’ work in the 80s and his work in the 90s. Such an understanding explicitly informs his account of reflexivity in late modernity.

Chapter Three, this is deliberation of an extremely odd and rationalistic form.

His account is a stratified ontology characterised by a much greater degree of theoretical rigour and sophistication than that of Elliott and Lemert (2008). Nonetheless it is a stratified ontology of the agent (rather than, as realists would advocate, a stratified ontology of the person<sup>18</sup>) which, given that Giddens takes agency to be intrinsically interwoven with structure, means that all pertinent features are incorporated into the duality of structure. Within his framework ‘human social activities ... are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors’ (Giddens 1984: 2). As he describes his own project, the ‘decentering of the subject’ is ‘basic to structuration theory’ and ‘social practices, biting into space and time, are considered to be at the root of the constitution of both subject and social object’ (Giddens 1984: xxii). We may not quite be social ‘all the way down’ but the distinct powers of the individual exist primarily at the level of depth psychology: particularly the mechanisms of affect which produce what Giddens calls ‘motive’. In the Giddensian analytical toolbox there are concepts pertaining to the duality of structure and then there are the psychoanalytical notions he takes from a range of authors, with any change at the level of individuals not explicable in terms of the duality of structure instead being unpacked in psychoanalytical terms<sup>19</sup>. Thus although his account is a great deal more sophisticated than that of Elliott and Lemert (2008), the same generic defect emerges: a lack of ontological space between structure and agency precludes the possibility of unpacking the interface between the two and examining the interplay which occurs. As Archer (2009: 9) writes, in agreement with Mouzelis,

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<sup>18</sup> See Archer (2000)

<sup>19</sup> See Mouzelis (1995) for an insightful critique of the appropriation of psychoanalytical concepts within sociology.

there is a ‘distance required between ourselves and our circumstances, which is necessary for reflexivity’. Furthermore, this is essential for the study of reflexivity because, as Mouzelis (2008: 75) insightfully observes, ‘the way in which subjects relate to virtual or actual social structures is not constant but variable’.

Unless we can conceptually isolate the different structural and agential aspects of the interface, we are left with what Layder calls ‘conceptual singularities’ and their ‘black holes’: as he puts it, ‘the argument that the social world can be represented by conceptual singularities means that the black holes that surround them “eat up” large chunks of social reality and leave us with a severely impoverished, emptied-out vision of the social world’. Or, in other words: concepts which aim to ‘transcend’ the structure-agency dichotomy do nothing more than obliterate the empirical variability of how people act vis-à-vis objective features of their social environment. Layder suggests that we need to abandon the notion of unifying principles (e.g. the duality of structure and agency), and instead try to ‘unpack and open up the explanatory range and power of social analysis’ (Layder 2004: 8-9).

## **Conceptualising Social Change**

When read in terms of the critique above, a number of important substantive issues arise from Giddens’ account of late modernity which, as yet, remain elusive:

- What are the cognitive and emotional implications for subjects of the increasing necessity of reflexivity?
- What role do these implications play in shaping individual responses to social change?
- What sources of support and guidance do subjects draw upon in coping with this

cognitive and emotional burden of reflexivity?

- How are different subjects in different situations differently able to cope with these demands of reflexivity?

My argument in this chapter is that while this literature is capable of raising these questions, albeit sometimes indirectly, it is fundamentally unable to offer satisfactory answers to them. While identifying the interface between changes at the structural and agential level, it lacks the capacity both to unpack the interactions analytically and, as a consequence, to explain them theoretically. Thus work on detraditionalisation is left at an impasse: unable to bridge the gap between the general and the specific. Given its inability to unpack processes of change over time, it is only able either to make grand pronouncements about social change at a level of abstraction which lacks any empirical value or to cite particular instances of phenomena understood to instantiate these changes. The two aspects of the detraditionalising picture are never linked; it is never concretely explained how change at one level shapes change at the other (and vice versa). Its reliance on structurationist theory leaves it prone to what Archer (1995) calls 'central conflation', causing the proliferation of Layder's 'conceptual singularities' discussed earlier in this chapter.

While structurationist theory avoids the pitfalls of other attempts to theorise the relationship between structure and agency (either denying causal efficacy to agents, as in forms of economic and historical determinism, or denying causal efficacy to structures, as in rational choice theory), it commits a distinct though related error: collapsing the two terms into one another such that while an interface between them is theoretically affirmed, the concrete explanation of that interface is conceptually precluded. Archer (1995: 80) argues that this problem rests on a failure

to understand the distinct time horizons of both structure and agency. While there is an element of obvious truth to the notion of the duality of structure and agency (i.e. if there were no agents there could be no structures) it does not follow from this that structure and agency cannot be separated. She argues that ‘conflation always entails a failure to incorporate temporality into social theory properly. This it seems is a logical consequence of conflation itself.’ (Archer 1995: 80) At any given point in time, human action takes place within a structured context and this action contributes to the reproduction or transformation of that context, which in turn stands as a structured context for future action. While Archer broadly accepts the structurationist proposition that structure and agency are mutually constituting, she argues that it is necessary to distinguish analytically rather than ontologically between them: a stance she terms ‘analytical dualism’. It holds that while reciprocal interplay is intrinsic to structure and agency, this does not (contra structurationist accounts) entail that they are conceptually inseparable. In fact a failure to recognise their distinct characteristics (viz. their operation on different time intervals) precludes an investigation of their interplay because it compresses the moment of interaction into a single point precluding the possibility of specifying when, why and how structure is transformed or reproduced through human action. This leaves it necessary for Giddens to stress the ‘quintessential polyvalence of each “moment”, both replicatory and transformatory’ without offering any analytical tools with which to concretely explain the dynamics of this balance (Archer 1995: 89). In avoiding this we are able to recover the space between the ‘global’ and the ‘personal’ in such a way as to allow the sociological explanation of the interplay which occurs between the two.

## Social Change and Personal Change

Underlying this critique has been a series of questions concerning the sociology of ideas. What has made the late modernity literature<sup>20</sup> so popular? Why have so many seemingly found the ideas within it compelling? Why has it circulated so pervasively across sub-disciplinary boundaries? The appeal of this literature seems to rest on its apparent capacity to illuminate the changing conditions of personal life, addressing a question which is confused and contested in equal measure: what is it like to be a person now? It can appear to offer resources for the exercise of the sociological imagination, or at least the impulse underlying it, seemingly addressing the idea that 'the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within the period' and looking to personal life to understand how 'by the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of the society and to the course of its history' (Mills 2000: 5). However in practice, its promise is illusory, with its conceptual inadequacies producing a tendency to highlight the interface between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' while systematically obscuring the interplay between them.

The problem is the theory of the person upon which the literature relies. The Giddensian subject leaves too little space between 'psychic life' and 'global forces': offering no account of how persons change as circumstances change, instead presenting us with an excessively psychologised portrayal of decontextualised individuals adapting or failing to adapt to equally decontextualised social forces. The recurrent value many have found in this literature embodies a persistent impulse to incorporate the micro-sociological into macro-sociological accounts of social change

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<sup>20</sup> As noted earlier, the work of Giddens is being treated as representative of a broader, though by no means homogenous, literature addressing largely the same issues.

and vice versa. If we accept the notion that ‘neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both’<sup>21</sup> then our theorisation of ‘the life of an individual’ ought to assume a central place among sociological concerns despite the disciplinary anxieties provoked by such a question (Layder 1997: 51). This concern for the ‘life of an individual’ does not entail individualism because there is more to a life than the properties and powers of the individual leading it (Archer 2000). This is why the language of the ‘individual’ is avoided throughout this project, instead using the language of persons and personhood to convey an attentiveness to the ‘life of an individual’ rather than the individual in and of themselves. On this view, personhood unfolds in the context of a lived life: people become who they are through engaging with their circumstances and, through doing so, contribute in however small a way to the reproduction or transformation of those circumstances.

Mills argued that that “‘three sorts of questions’ have been persistently asked by those who ‘have been imaginatively aware of the promise of their work’. The first concerns the structure of ‘this particular society as a whole’, the relationships between its components and the ‘meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change’. The second concerns the position of this society within ‘human history’, the ‘mechanics by which it is changing’ and ‘its characteristic ways of history-making’. The third concerns the ‘varieties of men and women’ that ‘prevail in this society and in this period’, how they are ‘selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted’ and ‘the meaning for “human nature” of each and every feature of the society we are examining’ (Mills

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<sup>21</sup> It is obviously the case that many theorists have sought to dissolve the property and powers of the ‘individual’ (Archer 2000). However doing so tacitly affirms the underlying Millsian proposition, representing a particular way of explaining the content of individual lives in terms of the history of society.

2000: 5-6). It is this third type of sociological question to which the present inquiry is addressed. If we wish to understand what kinds of social beings people become then we must understand human becoming itself (Archer 1995: 281). This thesis is an inquiry into human becoming, understood as a relational process susceptible to sociological inquiry<sup>22</sup>, with the intention of theorising personal change in a way which can be deployed to practical effect in empirical research and that opens up, rather than closes down, the interplay between the micro and the macro<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Which is to say it should not be abandoned as the territory of psychology, though inquiries at this level may very well push against disciplinary boundaries in a way generative of transdisciplinary understandings (Sayer 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Or the biographical and the historical, the private and the public, the individual and the social (etc). These dualism are not synonymous but they are homologous, with their frequently fuzzy character redolent of a continued failure of sociological theory to adequately address the underlying dimensions along which sociological questions tend to be asked (Mouzelis 1995).



## **Chapter 2. Biography and Reflexivity**

In the last chapter I argued that the account of late modernity offered by Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) poses an array of pertinent questions about processes of socio-cultural change in the 21st century. This has played a significant part in establishing its place within the sociological canon, leaving it widely drawn upon across a variety of sociological sub-disciplines in order to frame research questions, contextualise data and incorporate micro-social findings into a macro-social schema. However I contended that underlying theoretical inadequacies in how detraditionalisation, as the process bringing about the putative late modern transformation of personal life, is conceptualised leaves the broader body of work ill-suited to this task: given its deficient understanding of the interface between structure and agency it fails to offer any explanatory purchase on how particular structures and particular agents interact in different times and spaces. While it is widely seen to offer theoretical and methodological tools to incorporate micro-social data into a macro-social framework, it is my contention that it does anything but, instead, merely amalgamating a general and non-empirical account of social and cultural change with the specific and empirical findings of local research. Furthermore, the conceptual instruments brought to bear on data during such a process actively narrow the range of articulable explanations within the confines of the theoretical framework, as a result of the central role played within the literature by a range of untenable theoretical dichotomies:

[F]ate (or the pre-ordained) v. choice (or reflexivity); necessity v. contingency; certainty v. uncertainty; security v. risk. Differentiated (or

organised) culture v. the de-differentiated (or disorganised); the embedded (situated or socio-centric) self v. the disembedded (de-situated or autonomous); self under control v. self in control; and virtues v. preferences (with values coming in between) Heelas (1996: 3)

While recognising that few, if any, empirical researchers drawing on this literature will remain entirely within its confines, it nonetheless poses a methodological challenge, particularly in so far as looking towards the notions of late modernity and detraditionalisation are being drawn upon for their perceived analytical utility in helping to explain and draw out the wider implications of empirical data. Rather than simply repudiate the Giddensian approach, my intention has been, thus far, to offer a critical though charitable account of it, as well as some of the uses to which it is put within social research. To repudiate it too readily risks missing an opportunity to better understand why and how it has proved so popular in spite of its problems and the criticism it has attracted. For instance, as Smart (2007: 18) observes, there have been many challenges to this account within the sociology of family life because ‘there is such a lack of congruence between the depiction of contemporary family life in the work of individualization theorists and the kinds of lives being represented in local and more closely specified studies of families, kinship and friendship networks’. So why does it retain the status it does? Smart (2007) construes its appeal as resting on the ‘visions’ and ‘heuristic devices’ it provides. While critical of this literature, she argues that:

[T]heory can operate at a range of levels and the fact that at its most general it inevitably becomes imprecise does not mean that the broad canvas does not

provide a way of conceptualizing large-scale trends or even of linking together ideas and explanations developed at a micro- or meso-level. Problems only really arise when such theorizations cannot respond to the weight of counter-evidence which is generated by more local or precise studies or by more thoughtful theoretical contributions. (Smart 2007: 25)

In its place she advocates that family studies be re-construed as the sociology of personal life, with an entirely new terminology which embraces ‘conceptual shifts as well as empirical changes to social realities’ (Smart 2007: 28). In its own terms, her account offers a compelling meta-theoretical appraisal of both the late modernity literature and a particular field of sub-disciplinary inquiry within which it has proved particularly influential. Yet in spite of the substantive plausibility of her ensuing arguments, they remain within the meta-theoretical limitations of the actual uses to which this problematic literature has been put. Transcending these constraints necessitates that we reconsider the underlying issue of what persons are and how they change. In particular, we must reject those approaches which ignore the ‘obvious multidimensional variability of the subject-object relationship’ (Mouzelis 2000: 17) and thus collapse the personal dimension as a vector through which social change is either amplified or repressed. This is why Archer’s (2007: 15) account of reflexivity ‘as a personal property of human subjects, which is prior to, relatively autonomous from and possess causal efficacy in relation to structural or cultural properties’ is so important to the present project.

## **The Realist Account of Reflexivity**

In contrast to the notion of reflexivity as monitoring offered by Giddens, Archer (2007: 4) defines it as ‘the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their social contexts and vice versa’. She offers this account as part of what she terms the ‘three-stage model’ of structure and agency, in contrast to what she calls the ‘two-stage model’. In the two-stage model, ‘structural and/or cultural properties objectively shape the situations that agents confront involuntarily and exercise powers of constraint and enablement in relation to subjective properties imputed to agents and assumed to govern their actions’ (Archer 2007: 15). Exactly what properties are imputed to agents depends on the theoretical approach being adopted. For instance within critical realism this has tended to be vested interests, within rational choice theory it has been instrumental rationality and within Bourdieusian theory it has been the habitus. The three-stage model she offers does not impute subjective properties to agents but rather accepts their empirical variability. This model argues that

structural and cultural properties objectively shape the situations that agents confront involuntarily, and inter alia possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to subjects’ own constellations of concerns, as subjectively defined in relation to the three orders of natural reality: nature, practice and the social’ and that ‘courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of subjects who subjectively determine their practical projects in relation to their objective circumstances (Archer 2007: 18).

The two-stage model recognises the causal significance of subjective deliberations but imposes their content on the basis of a theoretical presupposition. The three-stage

model argues that such presuppositions represent, at best, empirical generalisations. As Archer (2003: 133) argues:

This final stage of mediation is indispensable because without it we can have no explanatory purchase upon what exactly agents do. Deprived of such explanations, sociology has to settle for empirical generalisation about 'what most of the people do most of the time'. Indeed, without a real explanatory handle, sociologists often settle for much less: 'under circumstances x, a statistically significant number of agents do y'. These, of course, are not real explanations at all.

On such an account sociological explanation is seen as relying on an understanding of what agents do and why they do it i.e. the deliberations of actual persons. The two-stage model precludes such an understanding because it fails to recognise the causal power of determining one's aims in light of one's concerns and one's context (i.e. human reflexivity *sui generis*). Instead, it reduces the plans and reasons of agents into, inter alia, a sedimentation of their context (habitus) or an a priori property of the subject (instrumental reason). The claim being made by Archer here is that subjects actively shape their own trajectories through the social world, albeit in conditions not of their own choosing. The power to do this is seen to reside unambiguously within the subject, in contrast to the structurationist approach, which incorporates this distinctly human power into the duality of structure and agency, leaving a sparse ontology of the person encompassing only depth psychology and self-monitoring.

Reflexivity operates through what Archer terms the ‘internal conversation’<sup>24</sup>. These internal dialogues in which ‘people talk to themselves within their own heads, usually silently and usually from an early age’ (Archer 2007: 2) encompass a wide range of activities<sup>25</sup>, uptake of which varies between persons. Archer (2003, 2007) identifies four distinct modes through which reflexivity is practiced: communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexive and fractured. In each case, the tendency towards a particular mode emerges from the interaction between a person’s concerns and social context over time. It is a personal emergent property with causal consequences that are both internal and external, producing different tendential responses to structural and cultural properties with ensuing implications for patterns of social mobility, as well as aggregative (via tendencies at the population level) and emergent (via divergent propensities towards collective action) implications for social reproduction or transformation at the macro level.

**Communicative reflexives** rely on trusted friends and family (‘similar and familiars’) to complete and confirm their internal deliberations. While all can and sometimes do externalise their internal speech to external others, communicative reflexives do so recurrently, relying on these interlocutors to bring deliberations to a close. This necessitates relationships with ‘people who can understand and enter into the subject’s concerns and preoccupations to such an extent that they can complete and confirm their friend’s tentative thoughts by their talk together’ (Archer 2012: 147). Without interlocutors capable of doing this, communicative reflexivity is unsustainable because it represents a habitual reliance upon others to move from

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<sup>24</sup> Though there is more to internal conversation than reflexivity and more to thought than internal conversation. See Archer (2003) for an helpful account of the different ways in which internal conversation was treated by the early pragmatists, who originated a concept which has largely been abandoned by contemporary pragmatists.

<sup>25</sup> For example planning, reliving, mulling over, budgeting, deciding and imaginary conversations.

tentative conclusion to conclusive action. Depending on the intensity with which this is practiced, it represents a foregoing of ‘the inner speculative freedom to envisage the mid-term and long-term scenarios which could unfurl from following a single “first reaction”’ (Archer 2007: 274) because the impulse towards dialogical completion recurrently opens the deliberation to censure in terms of the shared horizons within the context. In this sense, communicative reflexivity will tend to confine practitioners to a shared context but it also depends on this context, as its practice relies on sharing enough contextual referents (so as to constitute convergent ‘mental furniture’) for the translation of internal deliberation into external dialogue to stand a chance at being subjectively successful.

In the absence of these conditions, when contextual discontinuity precludes the commonalities required for communicative reflexivity to be viable, subjects are thrown back upon their resources for deliberation, generating an ensuing tendency towards **autonomous reflexivity**. While they may share their internal deliberations with others this sharing is, contra communicative reflexives, either an information seeking or a retrospective exercise rather than a condition for reaching a decision. Biographical factors indicative of autonomous reflexivity include geographical mobility and the fragmentation of family relations but, as with the trust and understanding necessary for communicative reflexivity, the causal underpinnings of autonomous reflexivity can be found in the qualitative characteristics of relations within the natal context. Archer (2012) found these tended to involve the absence of relational harms (such as were present with the fractured reflexives) but also of the relational goods which characterised the circumstances of communicative reflexives. Unlike the communicative reflexives who were able to invest themselves in their natal context, evaluating it as valuable and seeking to replicate it to varying extents,

autonomous reflexives lacked coherent messages in their background which they could seek to reproduce. This often involved an ‘enforced independence’:

[C]ommon exemplifications are children assuming domestic responsibilities that are usually associated with adult roles and certainly taking charge of their own personal practical needs. Not infrequently, this extended to providing support for one parent or intermittently for both, thus seeking to compensate for the interpersonal deficiencies in the parental relationship. They phoned home to check that everyone was all right rather than to reassure their parent(s) that they were (Archer 2012: 168).

**Meta-reflexives** deliberate with reference to ethical, social and/or political commitments which define and give shape to their life. At some point these persons appropriated an idea or ideal from their circumstances which served to filter the novelty they came to encounter, producing a ‘contextual incongruity’ (as opposed to the contextual discontinuity generative of autonomous reflexivity and contextual continuity generative of communicative reflexivity) in which this unique commitment they bring to their contexts leaves them facing ‘an incongruity between what they would become - their aspirant vocation or the preconditions for it - and their social context, which impeded its realisation’ (Archer 2007: 155). The social order is problematised rather than normalised for meta-reflexives, creating a propensity to seek a vocation rather than a career, with an associated tendency towards occupational volatility rather than the mobility and immobility associated with autonomous and communicative reflexives respectively.

**Fractured reflexives** experience difficulty in sustaining an efficacious



internal conversation and their internal deliberations will often intensify distress and disorientation rather than leading from subjective concerns to practical projects. *Impeded* fractured reflexives show a marked propensity towards a particular mode which, given a future absencing of factor(s) which serve to interrupt its emergence<sup>26</sup>, would likely manifest in a sustained practice. *Displaced* fractured reflexives have previously practiced a particular mode but have been knocked out of this tendency by changes which have led to the dissipation of the conditions upon which this practice depended. In contrast, *expressive* reflexivity represents a lack of any sustained tendency, relying on ‘gut feelings’ and intuitions to negotiate the situations they encounter, engendering a life with an episodic quality and a sustained inability to exercise agency over their circumstances.

This approach to conceptualising reflexivity risks an obvious objection from those who hold that social factors have to be internalised as part of a subject’s dispositions in order to be efficacious. Rejecting this does not entail a denial that any constraints or enablements operate this way, only that we cannot justify this claim a priori<sup>27</sup>. If we insist on internalisation then we lose purchase upon the dissimilar responses which otherwise similarly placed persons can enact in response to the same opportunity costs. Structural deterrents represent empirical tendencies and invoking personal properties and powers to explain why particular subjects are or are not willing to meet their attendant costs does not entail voluntarism, only a denial of determinism. It does not change the fact that ‘we are fallible, can get it wrong and have to pay the objective price for doing so’ (Archer 2007: 18-22). The point is not to deny the efficacy of structural and cultural factors, only the assumption of their

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<sup>26</sup> Such as trusted interlocutors for an impeded communicative reflexive, self-trust in the case of an impeded autonomous reflexivity or a viable and meaningful cause in the case of an impeded meta-reflexive.

<sup>27</sup> The implications of this are worked out in greater depth in Chapter Seven. See the discussion of the conditioned ‘me’ in particular.

internalisation. Many of our deliberations would be incomprehensible if we were to deny the reality of the ‘large tract of life in which things do happen to us involuntarily, such as our initial social placement, the life chances “assigned to us”, and the opportunity costs attaching to various courses of action’ (Archer 2003: 75).

However the assumption of internalisation obscures one of the most important issues involved in understanding the relationship between personal and social change: the temporal sequencing of constraints and enablements. It is imperative that we avoid construing persons as fixed while looking at social change as dynamic because our misrepresentation of the former engenders a tendency to misrepresent the latter. The internalisation thesis overgeneralises one temporal mode through which structural and cultural factors operate (the conditioned ‘me’ which confronts present circumstances) and ignores two others: the present ‘we’ in relation to whom ‘I’ act and the future ‘you’ towards which my action is orientated. Elaborating upon these potentially oblique remarks necessitates an exploration of relationships and ideas, as well as their causal operation in terms of an individual biography.

## **Biography and Relationships**

Though never absent from sociological thought<sup>28</sup>, the importance of relations to sociological explanation has been affirmed from a variety of different standpoints in recent years. King (2010) describes this as a new consensus within the discipline. One of the most sophisticated examples of this is social network analysis, which has spawned a rich empirical literature illustrating how ‘different patterns of connection

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<sup>28</sup> See Donati (2010, 2013)

generate different opportunities, constraints and dynamics for those connected in them, both generically and according to the actor's specific location in the pattern' (Crossley 2010: 14). As an explanatory programme, with a diverse and rich history (Scott and Carrington 2011), it has undoubtedly generated considerable results. It grew from a potent critique of the explanatory deficiencies endemic in 'variables sociology', construing such approaches as vacuously generalising because of their reliance on a priori categorisation of individuals into socio-demographic categories. Instead it advocated a shift of ontological focus towards 'relations or links between units' and an inductive explanatory programme which seeks to understand how these structured patterns produced social outcomes (Degenne and Forse 1999: 1-3). In doing so, it repudiated the macro/micro and holist/individualist dualisms of classical sociological thought, albeit to varying extents within a far from homogenous literature which offers no 'theory' of social networks per se (Donati 2010: 92). Crossley (2011: 13-14) describes this repudiation in terms of 'substantialism', understood as the defining error of both holist and individualist social thought:

The holist envisages society as a given, a pre-constituted entity or 'substance' with an underlying and determinate essence which can be invoked to explain what happens within it. They treat 'society', 'capitalism' or whatever as something which somehow lies beyond or behind the relations and interaction which instantiate and which explains those relations and interactions [...] The holist fails to see that society is constantly in the making, always becoming, that it is wholly dependent upon what happens within it for its identity, form and existence [...] Individualism, especially in its ontological form, is no less substantialist than holism, focused as it is

upon ‘ the individual’ as a supposed underlying bedrock of social life [...] the irreducibility of interaction, the significance of networks and their centrality to sociology suggest that our basic unit of analysis is not or at least should not be individuals but rather structures of interaction [...] the individual is not the most basic unit of social life but rather a unit too basic to capture much that is most significant about the social world

There is an obvious parallel here to Archer’s (1995) critique of upwards and downwards conflation, discussed in the previous chapter. The ‘relational sociology’ advocated by Crossley (2011) correctly identifies and critiques reductive modes of explanation which proceed by denying the autonomy of either the ‘parts’ or the ‘whole’. Likewise the identification of this explanatory pathology as lying in the ontological commitments made within holist and individualist accounts is, at least partially, correct. As Smith (2010: 232) observes, part of this concern derives from a broader philosophical movement against essentialism. However in common with such anti-essentialism, relational sociologies are prone to engaging in what Sayer (2004) calls a ‘PoMo flip’: responding to an untenable theoretical position by inverting it and retaining the conceptual structure which generated the original problem. In this case, an adroit critique of a substantialist ontology ill-equipped to incorporate relations between substances into social explanation gives rise to a concern for relations tout court.

But what are ‘relations’? On Crossley’s (2011) understanding they are ‘lived trajectories of iterated interaction’. As he puts it, ‘to say that two actors are related is to say that they have a history of past and an expectation of future interaction and that this shapes their current interactions.’ (Crossley 2010: 28). Such relationships

are path-dependent, possessed of their own histories, comprising both ‘the sedimented past and projected future of a stream of interaction’ (Crossley 2010: 35). In this sense relations have a shared, though contestable, past. The relation has its own history of emergence, apprehended internally by each party, which can be understood subjectively or intersubjectively: ‘we can and do tell stories about our relationships, for example, relating how we met and what events we have been through together’ (Crossley 2010: 36). Our own history, as beings orientated towards others, carries the traces of past relations within it:

Relations can become latent in the sense that we no longer interact with another on the basis that we once did. But relations can never be undone. If John and Jane part ways and do not meet for 25 years, they will still meet as two people who knew each other 25 years previously. Time is irreversible and though they go through ups and downs and may change radically, so too, therefore, are relationships. We cannot return to a point where the other is unknown to us (Crossley 2010: 35)

This is, as Archer (2014: 160) puts it, a transactional sociology which sees ‘relations’ as patterns of interaction. In doing so, the reality of relations in and of themselves is denied; instead they are conceptualised as interaction(s) and the stories related persons tell (themselves and each other) about this interaction. Relations are seen to be constituted through recurrent interaction, with Crossley observing how,

[m]uch of our interaction in everyday life and much of our interaction in situations involving conflicts of interest is interaction with others with whom

we are likely to interact on an indefinite number of occasions in the future, that is, others with whom we have relationships. Indeed, interactions which we know to be one-shot are relatively infrequent and usually trivial, e.g. strangers talking on a train journey. The vast majority of our meaningful interaction is with neighbours, family members, colleagues, friends and associates (Crossley 2010: 60)

However this still leaves the obvious question of what produces a tendency amongst a given set of individuals towards ‘a history of past and an expectation of future interaction’ which ‘shape their current interactions’ (Crossley 2010: 28). Crossley recognises the need for such an explanation, without which interaction would inevitably be construed as ‘either a random and inexplicable happening or the caused effect of something preceding it’ (Crossley 2010: 112). But his critique of substantialism leaves him arguing that ‘interaction is a whole greater than the sum of the separate individuals who constitute its parts’ such that ‘actors are entangled within it to the point of inseparability’ (Crossley 2010: 32). The ‘purposes’ he affirms as crucial for explaining interaction must therefore also be explained by interaction but given this ‘inseparability’ how are we to distinguish between explanandum and explanans? The problem here is not with the notion of ‘purposes’ per se but rather with the lack of anything beyond the interaction in relation to which persons orientate themselves purposefully. This is precisely the role played by ‘relational goods’ which, as Archer argues,

have the generative tendency to create bonds and interdependencies at the empirical level amongst the persons involved that denote more than ‘good

interpersonal relations'. They indicate something in excess of a degree of warmth and some regularity of contact. That 'something' refers to emergent properties, namely 'internal goods' (such as love, reliance, caring and trust) that cannot be produced by aggregation and are also deemed highly worthwhile in themselves (2012: 99)

Introducing this notion does not represent a turn away from interaction, only a qualification of its importance. As will be examined in later chapters, the relational goods and evils encountered in the natal context are integral to the trajectory adolescents and young adults begin to exhibit in relation to the social world, as well as the practice of reflexivity emergent from this. Situated interaction is integral to the character of these relations, unfolding in the milieux of home, school, locality etc. But is it the relations themselves, as opposed to the interactions through which they are reproduced or transformed, which exercise a causal influence over biographies?

## **Biography and Ideas**

In their empirical study of the moral life of the American middle classes, Bellah et al. (1985) offer a poignant account of how the cultural resources available to individuals shape the unfolding of their lives. The terms within and through which one deliberates about life, its ultimate ends and how they might be pursued have profound consequences for the direction that life takes. The authors describe how they 'wanted to know what resources Americans have for making sense of their lives, how they think about themselves and their society, and how their ideas relate to their actions' (Bellah et al. 1985: x). Through their investigation they sought to

shed light on ‘the tension between how we live and what our culture allows us to say’ (Bellah et al. 1985: viii). However their understanding of these resources is left conceptually underdeveloped throughout the study, which is particularly frustrating given how vividly they write about cultural resources in an empirical mode within it. Part of this understanding is exhibited in their connected notion of ‘languages’, understood as ‘modes of moral discourse that include distinct vocabularies and characteristic patterns of moral reasoning’ (Bellah et al. 1985: 334). These in turn are understood as part of ‘culture’ which refers to ‘those patterns of meaning that any group or society uses to interpret and evaluate itself and its situation’ (Bellah et al. 1985: 333).

However while this network of concepts might be underdeveloped it is by no means incoherent. Its value lies in identifying the interpretative resources available to individuals, construed as deliberative moral agents, at a particular time and place. As such the account proceeds in an implicitly realist manner, in so far as it rests upon a distinction between such cultural resources and the uses to which they are contingently put by particular subjects. Nonetheless, the conspicuously absent theorisation of the interface between the former and the latter creates an effectively structuralist tendency in their account. While they recognise the different ‘languages’ which variably predominate within the cultural environment of their various research participants, their failure to address how these cultural forms are mediated by the capacities of particular individuals leaves a one-sided picture of individuals as locked within the moral logic internal to any such language. Although they are committed to affirming the agential capacities of such individuals, with the important consequence that they recognise the (diachronic) biographical significance of the (synchronic) gap between what someone is trying to articulate and what the



cultural resources situationally accessible to them leave them able to articulate, this affirmation remains entirely abstract. Their recognition that the cultural resources available to persons in certain circumstances might be inadequate to the moral needs ensuing from those circumstances is laudable. In doing so they partially elucidate a dynamic which tacitly underpins much worthwhile progressive cultural critique. Nonetheless, the enthusiastic cultural politics driving the book's project leaves them preoccupied with the inadequacy and constraint of the individualist 'languages' they delineate whereas, as an empirical claim, one could equally identify the enabling dimensions of such languages, particularly vis-à-vis collectivist alternatives, without unambiguously endorsing either (Bellah et al. 1985: 297-307). Furthermore, the lack of any theory of constraint or enablement leaves them unable to concretely identify how these 'languages' act synchronically in relation to specific projects of articulation and, as such, influence the diachronic unfolding of an individual's biography. Without this, they also lack an appreciation of how these micro-cultural dynamics have macro-cultural consequences i.e. how the existential adequacy, or lack thereof, of cultural forms at an individual level shapes and is shaped by socio-cultural change at a societal level.

Porpora (2003) covers similar ground in his discussion of 'resources of the self'. He suggests that identification with political or demographic categories stands as a sociologically well-understood instance of how culture can be drawn upon by individuals in the articulation of their unfolding selfhood (Porpora 2003: 238). Likewise, notions such as 'calling', 'journey' or 'quest' can play an important role in elaborating an understanding of the continuity and purposes of life. He also discusses less quotidian instances from his research interviews such as practices of astrology and tarot. As he describes the latter, 'the tarot provides for Anand a form of

meditation, a device for the self-reflexive monitoring of her life' (Porpora 2003: 240). Such an example aptly illustrates the importance of explicitly affirming that culture is not exhausted by propositional culture: the latter is a subset of culture as a whole, specifically that between which logical relations obtain which are always potentially relevant to a subject as mediated by concrete circumstances and their attendant contingencies (Archer 1988). As an empirical example of the understanding invoked here, we might look to Marsh and Roberts (2011) in their empirical study of internal conversation and music fandom. Though the value of music for an individual is not reducible to their engagement with it as a cultural resource<sup>29</sup>, such engagement does take place and it is shaped by the prevailing practice of reflexivity within an individual's life (Marsh and Roberts 2011). The suggestion being made is that culture as a whole (the potentially intelligible contents of the multi-media archive) represent the source of Peirce's 'booty' (Archer 2003). On the view that is being offered in this thesis, 'signs, symbols and languages given to us through paperbacks, soap operas, chat shows, docudramas, film, video, self help manuals, therapy workshops, music videos and the like' stand as 'the resources from which we tell our stories' (Plummer 1995: 137).

It is important that we properly recognise the ideational dimensions to reflexivity because the reflexive processes which drive biographical unfolding involve the use of descriptions which are, at least in part, particular to the subject. As Archer notes of the process of prioritising one's concerns, 'this is done in their own conversational terms (i.e. under their own descriptions) and it is intrinsically fallible, yet corrigible' (Archer 2000: 238). This then poses the question of how the terms under which one deliberates constrain and enable the form and content of those

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<sup>29</sup> The risk here is that we inadvertently instrumentalise culture on an existential level.

deliberations. Likewise, do they entail differential degrees of fallibility and corrigibility within deliberative processes? Meaningful activity is always ‘mediated by interpretations of the action environment coloured by actors’ past experiences and self-understandings’ which condition the reflexive formulation of projects and ensuing trajectories of action (Gross 2008: 260-3). Understanding the role that cultural resources play in this process of mediation is an integral bulwark against voluntarism. These important issues remain undertheorised and their relative neglect can be understood, perhaps, as symptomatic of what Al-Amoudi and Wilmott (2011) see as a broader tendency within critical realist thought to downplay the notion of epistemic relativism, such as to pay ‘lip service to a stance that, in practice, is mobilised to brush off’ critics of realism (Al-Amoudi and Wilmott 2011: 39) rather than fleshing out its conceptual ramifications. Though presented for rather different purposes, their claim that ‘concept dependency implies more than a mere acknowledge of fallibility’ (Al-Amoudi and Wilmott 2011: 34) has important ramifications for the present argument. It is important that we explore the substantive implications of epistemic relativism, as usefully articulated by Lawson (2003) below, for how we conceive of ideational influences as a matter of independent variability in the unfolding of biography:

[O]ur categories, frameworks of thinking, modes of analysis, ways of seeing things, habits of thought, dispositions of every kind, motivating concerns, interests, values, and so forth, are affected by our life paths and socio-cultural situations, and thereby make a difference in how we can and do 'see' or know or approach things, and indeed they bear on what we seek to know. (Lawson 2003: 162)

Such a claim should not be construed as deterministic, in the sense of a strong Whorfianism which claims that language determines the boundaries of thought. As Archer argues, 'our reliance upon the public domain of culture for thinking can be upheld, without this determining what we do with it - that is the content of our mental activities.' (Archer 2003: 69). In fact approaching the reflexive mediation of culture in this way helps sensitise us to the histories of emergence within an individual's life and, in doing so, allows us to move from abstract statements about ideational influence, which because of their extemporaneity tend towards determinism, to more empirically nuanced claims about conditioning.

The process of making our way through the world necessitates internal conversation, particularly given the intensification of individual choice which characterises late capitalism, as daily life poses a plethora of questions (ranging from the practical to the existential) which demand internal deliberation about what to do and who to be (Archer 2003, 2007, 2012). Similarly in so far as we are social beings, we converse with others and we spend much of our time implicitly or explicitly giving an account of ourselves and coping with the accounts others give of us (Hacking 2002). In all cases we rely on cultural resources (categories, terms, metaphors, analogies etc.) in these activities and these exercise powers of constraint and enablement in relation to our attempts to articulate or elaborate an underlying experiential reality. Reflexivity involves both cognitive affordances and cultural affordances (Mutch 2004, 2007) with the preponderance and character of each at particular moments in an individual's life constituting important causal influences on the unfolding of their biography over time. Our capacity for making sense of our experience is shaped by the characteristics of the cultural resources available to us.

These are drawn upon in ‘modelling our options, internally, so we can visualise the choices that lie before us’ (Wiley 2006: 14) and influence the decisional premises, of which we may be more or less conscious (Mouzelis 1995: 113), underpinning our deliberations. The cultural resources deployed in such a fashion have their own histories of emergence and exercise a relatively autonomous power in relation to the contingent use that particular individuals make of such resources in the course of their biographical unfolding.

Cultural resources can also be designed in view of their deployment by reflexive individuals. For instance Mouzelis (2010: 273) observes ‘the phenomenal spread of “self-help” or “do-it-yourself” manuals. Such manuals advise the subject of how to rationally achieve not only external goals (such as acquiring more economic or political capital) but also internal ones such as increasing one’s self-confidence, self-control, decisiveness, etc.’. Marketdata Enterprises estimated that the total U.S. Market for ‘self-improvement products’ as a whole amounted to \$9.6 billion industry in 2005. The International Coach Federation estimated that motivation and self-improvement coaching was a \$1.5 billion industry in 2007 and that most of this was business coaching (Ehrenreich 2009: 99). The extraordinary growth of management consultancy and business coaching discussed by Thrift (2005) can be understood in similar terms, with the endless succession of ‘business fads’ indicative of an increasingly pragmatic orientation towards the role that cultural resources and reflexive technologies play within organisational processes. The same trend can be seen from a different perspective in the ‘consciousness politics’ of the 1960s and its cultural outgrowths (Rifkin 2009: 415-19, Thrift 1999: 150-1). There is a political economy of reflexive technology, reflected in the thriving industry founded on its production, dissemination and popularisation (Thrift 1999:

147). However for present purposes it is enough to point to this and be clear that the ideational dimension to everyday life is not being understood in a politico-economic vacuum.

### **Chapter 3. Analysing Biographical Change**

It has been argued in the previous chapters that the influential work of Anthony Giddens concerning late modernity, which is taken here as the outstanding exemplar of a broader body of scholarship expounding an account of late/liquid/second modernity, raises important questions about macroscopic social change and its implications for the personal lives of reflexive individuals. However the account Giddens offers has deep defects, rooted in underlying difficulties which can be identified in structurationist theory, severely limiting its utility when its concepts are applied analytically to the interpretation of data. This is problematic given the recurrent appeal which this body of work has held for researchers across a range of sociological subdisciplines. This critique has been elaborated as part of a broader effort to explore the importance of conceptions of personhood to theories of social change, developing the argument that the former has major implications for the latter in terms of both the account itself and its viability as a conceptual resource to be drawn upon by empirical researchers. The approach being advocated in its place looks at persons in biographical terms, in terms of a temporally extended and socially situated process of human becoming rather than in terms of individuals *per se*, which superficially accords with a broader tradition of biographical research that has recently been going through something of a renaissance. What Chamerayne, Bornat and Wengraf (2000) label a 'biographical turn' has been driven in part by a sense of the inadequacy of prevailing sociological accounts of agency. In its more recent instantiations this renewed interest in biographical methods has frequently exhibited a Giddensian focus, with its understanding of biography tied up with the notion that a putative 'detachment from traditional ideas, values, norms, beliefs, and

ideologies generates greater individual autonomy and freedom of choice for individuals to shape their lives' (Mills 2007: 65). This leaves the individual 'continuously confronted with a plurality of uncertain life course options' such that life becomes a 'reflexive project' and 'individuals are continuously forced to organise the future and reconstruct their own biographies in light of rapidly changing information and experiences' (Mills 2007: 67-8). The present chapter seeks to distance this thesis from such an approach by offering a relational realist account of biography which rescues it from the potential for monadism inherent in the concept.

## **Reflexivity and the Life Span**

In the previous chapter, the account Archer (2003, 2007) offers of reflexivity-as-deliberation was contrasted to the notion of reflexivity-as-monitoring found in the detraditionalisation literature. Archer's account differentiates between different modalities through which the capacity for reflexivity is exercised: communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexive and fractured. Although most adults exhibit a dominant tendency, all human beings are taken, to varying extents, to practice each mode at different points and in different areas of their lives. This recognition of diversity in the internal life of the subject, both between persons and within the lifespan of any given person, opens up a conceptual space which the central conflation endemic in the detraditionalisation literature shuts down. It becomes possible to consider the different causal pathways through which structural and cultural circumstances tendentially shape the practice of reflexivity, as well as how the range of ensuing practices differentially contribute towards the reproduction or transformation of those circumstances.



Archer (2003, 2007) approaches this issue through a triad of concepts: contextual continuity, contextual discontinuity and contextual incongruity. The central claim here is that ‘the interplay between people’s nascent “concerns” (the importance of what they care about) and their “context” (the continuity or discontinuity of their social environment) shapes the mode of reflexivity they regularly practice’ (Archer 2007: 96). Contrary to many prevailing theories of socialisation, her account rests on the understanding that, even at a young age, individuals engage in an evaluative way with their social environment and these engagements, as well as the characteristics of their environment, shape their emerging practice of reflexivity as they move into adulthood. Given the intensification of social change, ‘there is less and less to normalize’ and the traditionally invoked agencies of socialisation come to stand as cyphers: ‘socialization can no longer be credibly conceptualized as a largely passive process of “internalization”’. This ‘relative absence of authoritative sources of normativity’ means ‘young people are increasingly thrown back upon reflexively assessing how to realize their personal concerns in order to make their way through the world’ (Archer 2012: 96-7).

Archer understands this process as accomplished in terms of ‘three significant moments that can be distinguished as phases of the life-long internal conversation: discernment, deliberation and dedication’ (Archer 2007: 20). The first stage of discernment involves the ‘reflective, retrospective and prospective’ identification of what we deem to be worthwhile. The individual considers the things they have done, are doing and might do, incorporating the ‘reflective, retrospective and prospective through a dialogue which compares and contrasts them’ (Archer 2000: 233). It is an ‘inconclusive moment of review’ which helps to ‘clarify our

relationship to our reigning concerns by bringing to the surface our predominant satisfactions and dissatisfactions' with our life as it currently stands (Archer 2000: 235). In essence, it is a process of existential inventorying, through which we fallibly take stock of what matters to us, the concerns that our current circumstances give rise to. The second stage of deliberation involves the movement from review to evaluation, as we consider the implications of endorsing and acting upon the concerns we have discerned. It involves a 'very provisional ranking of the concerns with which a subject feels that she should and can live' (Archer 2007: 20). We consider the implications of our concerns and how these sit in relation to each other, encompassing the rejection of projects stemming from our concerns at one extreme and initial stages of commitment to projects at the other (Archer 2000: 236). This phase often involves 'a visual projection of scenarios seeking to capture, as best the subject is able, the *modus vivendi* that would be involved, whilst listening to the emotional commentary that is provoked and evoked when imagining that particular way of life' (Archer 2007: 20). The third stage of dedication represents the culmination of this process, as the subject decides 'not only whether a particular *modus vivendi* is, in her view, worth living, but also whether not she is capable of living such a life' (Archer 2007: 21). It involves the identification of prime concerns, as well as the conclusions that stem from these for the way of living we embrace, with the relinquishment or subordination of other incompatible concerns as a corollary. It is crucial to stress the intrinsically temporal and provisional aspects of this process:

[T]here is a life-long dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity because circumstances can change (necessarily or contingently) and so can we (again

necessarily), as we move through the life cycle, and contingently because we can reassess our concerns (Archer 2003: 141)

The three-stage DDD movements described above are real, in the sense that generative mechanisms obtain at each stage of the process which, given the configuration of properties and powers within the subject and their social setting, when activated ‘move’ them on to the next ‘stage’ of the process. Nonetheless the projects which individuals invest themselves in presuppose social knowledge and self-knowledge and, in so far as each is irrevocably fallible and open to revision as either circumstances or self-change, practices and projects can never be final. This is why our actual practice of reflexivity over time is messy and particularistic, as circumstances change and we change, with ensuing needs for reevaluation and recommitment. A range of factors across the different domains of social life are responsible for this ideographic complexity and they must be considered in their specificity if we are to avoid ‘drifting into an unacceptable monadism or slipping into Beck’s portrayal of subjects’ capricious and serial self-reinvention’ when analysing reflexivity (Archer 2012: 97). In doing so, we begin to gain purchase upon what Archer describes as the ‘necessity of selection’ and ‘shaping a life’: the unavoidable need to select from the variety encountered through the lifecourse and the difficulties entailed by shaping a satisfying and sustainable way of living from what has been selected. Talking of ‘selection’ and ‘variety’ can easily be misconstrued. This is not a matter of detached choice but rather a path-dependent<sup>30</sup> elaboration of our evaluative orientation towards the possibilities we encounter. Through the developmental process of reacting to environmental stimuli, sifting the

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<sup>30</sup> In the sense that our evaluations, as well as the action orientations ensuing from them, often leave us differently placed in relation to our environment.

pleasant from the unpleasant and the desirable from the undesirable, an awareness of our first-order emotions begins to emerge which immediately poses questions about their compatibility and incompatibility that invite a deepening of our nascent dialogue about what matters to us (Archer 2000, Sayer 2011). As we elaborate upon this, coming first to exist as a being with these concerns and then as one who to some extent recognises herself as such, these evaluative orientations come to act as ‘sounding-boards, affecting our (internal) responses to anything we encounter, according to it resonating harmoniously or discordantly with what we care about most’ (Archer 2012: 22). This intensifies the aforementioned path dependency, with the elaboration of our evaluative orientations in relation to the novelty we encounter conditioning our future trajectory, as some possibilities are ‘shunned, repudiated or negatively sanctioned’ and others ‘welcomed, encouraged or positively sanctioned’ (Archer 2012: 23). This can be seen as a trajectory of selectivity, with the elaboration of our evaluative orientations serving to filter variety in a progressively more patterned way<sup>31</sup>. Our movement through the world begins to acquire a direction and a style, which we grossly misrepresent if we construe it in terms of an iterative confrontation ‘with a plurality of uncertain life course options’ such that life becomes a ‘reflexive project’ and ‘individuals are continuously forced to organise the future and reconstruct their own biographies in light of rapidly changing information and experiences’ (Mills 2007: 67-8). What such a construal misses is the cumulative manner in which past experience shapes present orientations towards future possibilities, filtering the variety we encounter rather than iteratively presenting us with the open vista of a future to be colonised.

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<sup>31</sup> Even impeded and displaced fractured reflexives can be seen to embody a patterning in this sense, albeit one tending towards truncation.

## **Reflexivity and Character**

The practice of reflexivity requires both self-knowledge and social knowledge. While we can, and sometimes do, act in a purely expressive manner, this is inevitably the exception rather than the rule, with its pervasiveness being the characteristic feature of fractured reflexivity. When our actions are reflexive in origin, they unavoidably implicate understandings concerning our properties and powers as distinct individuals. These understandings may regularly lack the status of knowledge: indeed they often remain tacit and inarticulate without circumstantial prompts which cause us to reflect back upon them. Yet our deliberations cannot but draw on fallible understandings of our concerns, our capacities and our limitations.

Our character is crucial to this process, understood in the neo-Aristotelian sense as our embodied habits of thought and action (Flanagan 2009, Franklin 2010, Sayer 2011, Smith 2003, Smith 2010). Character in this sense can be understood as a non-deterministic account of socially orientated dispositionality, as opposed to dispositionality in the natural order and practical order (Archer 2010: 132), encompassing dispositions which are interior to subjects and predispose them towards certain ends (Archer 2010: 140) but cannot be assumed to operate pre-reflexively.

Our experiences shape our character, particularly in early life, as Sayer observes in his account which draws on empirical work in developmental psychology:

It depends on the quality of care and the formation of supportive attachments

that both protect and nurture the development of responsible autonomy. The experience of being valued, cared for and loved - or being neglected, abused and unloved - shapes how we value others and our relation to self, and hence our ability to relate to others and form mutually beneficial attachments. (Sayer 2011: 148).

Attachment theory offers an empirically thorough and conceptually nuanced elaboration of this idea, in its account of how natal dependence shapes patterns of attachment behaviour in later life, without invoking some notion of the subject internalising natal relations which determine action in later life: ‘A principal means by which such experiences influence personality development is held to be through their effects on how a person construes the world about him and on how he expects persons to whom he might become attached to behave, both of which are derivatives of the representational models that he built up during his childhood’ (Bowlby 1988: 73). What this fundamentally dispositional account of emerging selectivity fails to grasp is the spur to reflexivity represented by these relations within the natal context<sup>32</sup>, as our evaluative orientations engender propensities to action which reshape both self and circumstances. In this sense we are able, as Mouzelis (2008) argues we must, to recognise the existence of internal constraints and enablements (an ‘internal environment of action’), while still affirming the ontogenetic primacy of reflexivity to the development and elaboration of personhood (Archer 2012: 98-101).

While such processes of character formation are susceptible to reflexive deliberation, such awareness is necessarily both fallible and retrospective. This claim

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<sup>32</sup> This issue is addressed in greater detail in the fifth chapter.

should not be construed as demarcating character as a somehow non-cognitive domain, nor one insulated from our reflexive projects, for our character is frequently an object of our internal conversations (particularly for meta-reflexives<sup>33</sup>) as Sayer recognises:

We may intermittently ‘take stock’ and evaluate our virtues and vices, or more simply our character ... We may feel we must be more assertive, more outgoing, less lazy, etc., and try to change ourselves through repeated practice in the hope that we become habituated to acting in these ways, so that it becomes ‘second nature’. This can be difficult not only because of the inertia of our existing embodied dispositions but because it may fail to bring the hoped-for effects and positive feedback. (Sayer 2011: 131)

Our deliberations upon our character give rise to projects of self-care and self-improvement. These are reflexive in the sense that they emerge as practical projects from deliberations about subjective concerns and objective circumstances. However they also include a further element in attempting to seek transformation of one’s own person as the aim of that project. Crossley (2004, 2006) offers an insightful exploration of a particular sub-category of projects of the self: namely those pertaining to exercising the body, as well as the ‘reflexive body techniques’ (RBTs) drawn upon by the individual in their enactment of such projects. He cautions against construing such projects in an overly instrumental fashion, as the goal of transforming or maintaining the body can co-exist with other motivations e.g. social aspects to an exercise class or ‘letting off steam’. However these too have both a

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<sup>33</sup> See for example Archer (2003: 260).

reflexive and a bodily component, as Roseneil (2007: 92) observes in her empirical study, ‘psychic conflict and distress could not straightforwardly be banished through the reflexive address of a rational internal conversation. Mental states were frequently and effectively shifted by somatic or relational practices, when attempts at cognitive reorientation failed.’

The concept of reflexive body techniques, when fully mapped out in Crossley (2005), offers a useful way to think through how reflexivity and the body are analytically distinguishable. His study of RBTs found certain daily activities with almost 100% uptake: washing hands, brushing teeth, bathing and showering (etc.). We might suspect that many more would be found if the instrument in use had a wider scope. Importantly these RBTs involve maintaining the body rather than transforming it. Yet it seems difficult to explain either the historical variability of RBTs or the statistical associations obtaining within clusters of them solely in terms of an individual’s engagement in the natural or practical orders. Furthermore, if we distinguish, as Crossley (2005) suggests we should, between those techniques used for reproductive purposes and those techniques used to pursue a transformative goal, it becomes possible to ask how the distribution of the two varies, at any level from the individual to the population as a whole. We might usefully rephrase the distinction in terms of morphogenetic and morphostatic projects for which the transformation or maintenance of the body are but one potential object. The concern in either case is reflexive, in the sense that the concern ‘bends back’ upon the subject, however it also pertains towards practices which are not themselves deliberated about though they might once have been.

Though projects emerge from deliberation, with their continuation or failure being in part a product of the character of prior internal conversation, they are



subsequently characterised by a degree of autonomy. For instance new reasons to continue might be found or goals may be revised as new ‘internal goods’ are acquired. Likewise the enactment of the project will change as will, trivially or otherwise, the characteristics of the person who embarked upon it. So while a goal might be embedded in the project, the individual who sought to pursue that goal, construing it in a certain way with certain understandings of how to reach it, might have changed significantly. This is emphatically true of projects which seek to work therapeutically on inner life: work is required and that work changes us. In such cases the ‘goal’ might be understood in negative terms, involving the removal of internal constraints rather than the pursuit of a positively defined specialised outcome (Mouzelis 2010). Though these changes might be trivial, depending on the project at hand, the possibility for them to be otherwise is inherent in what a project of self is. Striving for transformation of the self only makes sense relative to some understanding of constraints on that transformation i.e. people begin to do ‘self-work’ with some understanding, however wrong or vague it may be, as to what that self is and what work it needs. This understanding involves a fallible sense of our ‘embodied capacities, susceptibilities, needs and concerns’ which enter into our deliberations because of their integral relationship to our capacity for ‘flourishing or suffering’ (Sayer 2011: 120). While our character serves to constrain or enable us in the present, engendering behavioural propensities which can frustrate or facilitate our endeavours<sup>34</sup>, it is as much a matter of the future as the past. The person we believe ourselves to be is intimately connected to the person we would like to become.

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<sup>34</sup> Though often outstripping our discursive penetration.

## Possible Selves

Any project which involves work on the self entails, no matter how inchoately or incoherently, some sense of what would be a desirable change. However this sense of our own temporal extension, encompassing understandings of who we could be and who we seek to be, has a broader relevance than ‘self-work’<sup>35</sup> alone. The notion of ‘possible selves’<sup>36</sup> offers a useful conceptual framework through which to understand this temporal extension, as adroitly summarised by Stevenson and Clegg:

Possible selves are future representations of the self including those that are desired and those that are not. They can be experienced singly or multiply, and may be highly elaborated or unelaborated. They may relate to those selves we desire to become or those we wish to avoid. Possible selves play both a cognitive and an affective role in motivation, influencing expectations by facilitating a belief that some selves are possible whereas others are not and, by functioning as incentive for future behaviour, providing clear goals to facilitate the achievement of a desired future self, or the avoidance of a negative one. More significantly the possible selves construct holds that individuals actively manage their actions in order to attain desirable selves and evade less-desirable selves. As representations of the self in possible future states, possible selves give form, specificity and direction to an individual’s goals, aspirations or fears. In other words, elaborated possible

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<sup>35</sup> The parallel risks attached to such a concept are that we unduly marginalise it, treating it as a peripheral preoccupation within late capitalist societies, or that we see it as a defining characteristic of being human.

<sup>36</sup> Dunkel and Kerpelman (2006) offer a helpful overview of the wider body of work from which this concept originated.

selves influence the development of specific strategies for action, focus an individual's activities, give direction in the pursuit of these goals and energise the person to achieve them. Not unsurprisingly research has shown that those with highly developed career-possible selves are more motivated, goal orientated and energetic than those with less or unelaborated ones. These individuals are a lot more likely, when confronted with a threat to the possibility of achieving a desired career-possible self, to either persist with their goals and strategies or develop new career-possible selves. (Stevenson and Clegg 2012: 19)

The exercise of reflexivity entails an orientation towards the future, even if that is little more than an expressive repudiation of this future as a matter which concerns us. As Wiley (2006: 9) puts it 'if we attempt to foresee the various paths along which we might go, we can clearly see what is right for us': the impulse is fundamentally a practical one, emergent from the brute fact of being a human being situated in the social world. When faced with multiple choices, as we juggle overlapping but distinct 'issues' in our life, we find ourselves facing forward towards different images of who we might become, with the clarity and weight of this image varying within each individual's life and between individuals<sup>37</sup>. We face such choices constantly, so ubiquitously in fact that they might seem trivial in their implications, both through the substance of everyday life and through the simple passage of time itself. As we take stock of the things we do, the spiralling implications of our decisions and those of others (as well as the manifold ways in which they entangle,

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<sup>37</sup> Though the point in noting this is not to impute a randomness to this variability. Understanding why this is so necessitates recognition of the ideational dimension of reflexivity, as discussed in the previous chapter i.e. cultural affordances and constraints are operative in our capacity to conceive our future.

putting ‘control’ of our lives forever beyond our grasp) for the things that matter to us mean that even the most stable life is full of predicaments: options about what to do and who to be.

On the basis of their empirical study, Stevenson and Clegg (2012: 23) observe that ‘when we begin to look in more detail at the trajectories and at how past, present and future relate and at how constraints both continue to impact on choices, particularly in relation to locality and place, we can see how different forms of reflexivity account for the ways participants are envisaging their futures’. As well as shaping how possible futures are construed by subjects, the style of reflexivity also shapes how they tend to move towards or away from these possible futures. Brannen and Nilsen’s (2005) account of the different temporal orientations of young people within their study offers an interesting example of how the ‘possible selves’ concept could be operationalised to this end.

The continual negotiation of a past ‘me’ by a present ‘I’ which look towards a future ‘you’ (Archer 2003: 108-16) is richly idiomatic (with an irrevocable tendency towards personalisation) in a manner which transcends the narrowly linguistic. Even when our internal conversations are characterised by a sustained articulacy, this does not condemn us to be ‘dispassionate conversationalists’ because ‘words themselves can be infused with passion’ and they ‘depend upon the non-verbal images they summon-up’ Archer (2000: 231). However this intensely idiomatic aspect to our inner conversations engenders a variable degree of articulacy. Sometimes we are able to express to ourselves, perhaps even with a subjectively pleasing clarity, what it is we are trying to articulate. But more frequently we are not and the movement from the inarticulate to the articulate can be integral to how we change as persons over time, as Taylor observes:

[I]t is quite a common experience for us to feel remorse without being able fully to articulate what is wrong about what we have done. In these cases we may seek to understand further. And if we succeed, our feelings may alter. The remorse may dissipate altogether, if we come to see that our sense of wrong doing is unfounded; or it may alter in other ways, as we come to understand what is wrong; perhaps it will be more acute as we see how grave the offence was; perhaps it will be less as we see how hard it was to avoid (Taylor 1985: 63).

Such an experience is misconstrued if seen in terms of serial self-interpretation, such that one interpretation gives way to another and so forth, given that the object of interpretation itself undergoes change in a way irreducible to this seriality. The specific sequencing of the self-interpretation has causal effects over and above the brute fact of the repetition. For instance, we could easily conceive of this interrogation of one's guilt intensifying despair, as further investigation of the feeling of having done wrong leads someone to lose themselves in paroxysms of remorse. Our feelings may change as a result of our deliberation but this is manifestly not a Rortian process of redescription (Bhaskar 1989). The depth to this process cannot be adequately understood extemporaneously. As Taylor puts it, 'the attempt to articulate further is potentially a life-time process. At each stage, what we feel is a function of what we have already articulated and evokes the puzzlement and complexities which further understanding may unravel' (Taylor 1985a: 65). He goes on to offer an evocative example:

Thus consider someone who has been ashamed of his background. This is what we say (and also he says) retrospectively; at the time, this was not at all clear to him. He feels unease, lack of confidence, a vague sense of unworthiness. Then he is brought to reflect on this. He comes to feel that being ashamed for what you are, apologizing for your existence, is senseless. That on the contrary, there is something demeaning precisely about feeling such shame, something degrading, merely supine, craven. So he goes through a revolution like that expressed in the phrase 'black is beautiful'. Now the shame disappears; or sinks to a merely residual unease like the craving for a cigarette after meals of the ex-smoker; and is judged as merely another such nagging emotional kink, not as a voice telling him something about his predicament. (Taylor 1985a: 69)

In considering such a 'revolution' we can see two distinct time horizons at work; one in which past habits shape present evaluations and another in which present evaluations influence the person I subsequently become. While Taylor's intellectual interests leave this putative individual considered in isolation, it is far from difficult to imaginatively place this person in a social context, considering how past circumstances have shaped present evaluations and how present evaluations, as well as the action ensuing from them, will contribute towards the reproduction or transformation of circumstances. However Taylor's 'conceptual revolutions' are overly cognitive for present purposes. Nonetheless, there is intuitive value in identifying certain crucial events or points which contribute to us becoming who we are. The next section examines an influential idea to this end offered by Giddens and considers what we might learn from it.

## **Fateful Moments**

An integral aspect of the elaborated account of reflexivity offered in Giddens (1991) is the concept of 'fateful moments' which exhibits an apparent capacity to link biographical narrative with social change in a manner which affirms individual agency (Holland and Thomson 2009). Fateful moments are 'those when individuals are called on to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their future lives'. Giddens sees large tracts of life as either non-routinised and non-consequential ('free' time that we 'kill') or routinised and consequential ('where difficult decisions may often have to be taken' which can nonetheless be 'handled by strategies evolved to cope with them as part of the ongoing activities in question'). In contrast, fateful moments are non-routinised and consequential. Giddens explains how 'fateful moments are times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence' encompassing events such as the 'decision to get married', 'taking examinations, deciding to opt for a particular apprenticeship or course of study, going on strike, giving up one job in favour of another, hearing the result of a medical test, losing a large amount in a gamble, or winning a large sum in a lottery' (Giddens 1991: 112-13). On such occasions the individual might seek guidance from 'abstract systems' to 'help in risk assessment' because 'fateful decisions are usually almost by definition difficult to take'. These are 'moments when the individual must launch out into something new, knowing that a decision made, or a specific course of action followed, has an irreversible quality, or at least that it will be difficult thereafter to revert to the old paths' (Giddens 1991: 113). It is precisely this

difficulty which, he argues, explains a pre-traditional tendency towards reliance on conceptions of fortune or providence at such fateful moments. However 'in so far as conceptions of *fortuna* are completely abandoned' the individual must rely on the 'assessment of risk' because 'at fateful moments, the individual is likely to recognise that she is faced with an altered set of risks and possibilities' and at such times 'she is called on to question routinised habits of relevant kinds, even sometimes those most closely integrated with self-identity' (Giddens 1991 129-31). This isolates the elements of fateful moments which are of interest for this thesis (changes in objective circumstances and the 'identity work'<sup>38</sup> it gives rise to as the subject attempts to negotiate this change) but the underlying concept is ridden with difficulties.

One of the immediate difficulties which can be raised about this concept is the manner in which it delineates the fateful and non-fateful moments, with the former seen as occasional instances when the exercise of reflexivity shapes the life course against a backdrop of the latter, occupying vast tracts of the lived life, where reflexivity is inconsequential and affect reigns (Plumridge and Thompson 2003). As Adams (2004: 393) aptly describes it, Giddens paints a 'peculiarly arid picture of the processes we utilize to make sense of the world and of ourselves'. Life is rendered as either dramatic or mundane, with the concepts offering little purchase on the empirically convoluted but nonetheless real grounding of the former in the latter. Instead of seeing the matters about which we deliberate as being rooted in our affective responses to the world and our second-order responses to those responses (Archer 2000, Taylor 1989) we are understood to either 'reflexively control our

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<sup>38</sup> The distinction between personal change and identity change is an important one for this thesis. While the former will often encompass the latter, it is not co-extensive with it. See Gross (2009) for an interesting example of how the notion of change in self-concept (to cash out 'identity work' in a less fuzzy idiom) can be applied in sociological explanation.



activities, or else fatalistically resign the outcome of events to chance'. This arid view is a logical consequence of the sparse ontology of the person with which Giddens is working, as the neglect of any second-order personal emergent properties leaves the Giddensian subject normatively rudderless: in thrall to the affective dynamics which characterise the 'intimacies of the self' while rationally assessing the risks emergent from 'distant happenings', without the emergent constellation of personal concerns, in view of which expected outcomes of potential courses of action actually matter to subjects (Archer 2000, Maccarini 2012: 109, Sayer 2012). This produces a wildly implausible view of the individual as one who 'rationally separates out the world into things he or she can control, and things he or she cannot control' (Adams 2004: 393) perhaps reflecting the substantial roots of Giddens (1991) in an analysis of popular self-help books (Atkinson 2010: 33) as symptomatic of broader existential tendencies within late modernity. It is also an account which sits uneasily with his earlier work, with his account of 'risk assessment' as a reflexive process in late modernity presupposing precisely 'the possibility of actors distancing themselves from roles and resources in order to view them strategically' which Mouzelis (1995: 118-25) astutely observes is precluded by the structurationist account of structure as both medium and outcome of agency.

Plumridge and Thomson (2003) offer a thoughtful critique of the concept of fateful moments founded on an attempt to operationalise it in the context of longitudinal qualitative research. They explain how the initial appeal of the theory was in its apparently 'dynamic' nature and capacity to 'make sense of the process of change' at a biographical level. However although it 'provided us with an interesting starting point and some useful tools that we were able to operationalize in relation to empirical data, over time his framework became unsatisfactory both for descriptive

and explanatory purposes’ (Plumridge and Thomson 2003: 221). The complexity of lived lives, tending to be rendered more visible within longitudinal research, pushes at the boundaries of the analytical concepts used to describe and explain those lives. Plumridge and Thomson (2003: 217) describe their finding that ‘qualitative material exposes the limitations of such individualized explanatory models, pointing to the importance of processes rather than isolated moments, and to collective resources rather than simply to individual resourcefulness’. It also foregrounded ‘the provisionality of the kind of identity work that is captured in this method’ such that ‘what had appeared to researchers to fulfil Giddens’ criteria for a “fateful moment” in one round of interview data looked much more messy with the benefit of time’. In a later paper with a different co-author, Thomson describes how the concept’s focus on individual choice means that ‘this theoretical approach to understanding the significance of life events obscures relationships, investments and the wider power structures that might constrain choice in practice’, creating a tendency for researchers working within the model to take ‘professions of agency at face value’ (Holland and Thomson 2009: 459-64). As a consequence any attempt to understand those ‘times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence: or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences’ (Giddens 1991: 113) will, particularly in the context of qualitative interviewing, tend towards voluntaristic interpretations of how individuals responded, with situational constraints and enablements reduced to their subjective apprehension as reported by the participant.

Much of the difficulty discussed by these authors (Holland and Thomson 2009, Plumridge and Thomson 2003) stems from the actualist bias inherent in the concept: it deals with the level of events, as apprehended by the subject, while ignoring the

underlying causal mechanisms which have produced those events (Bhaskar 1978). This manifests itself in the tendency displayed by Giddens to slide between talking of ‘fateful circumstances’, ‘fateful moments’ and ‘fateful decisions’. So too in his explanation that fateful moments are ‘formed’ of ‘episodes’ where a ‘particular situation or episode may be both highly consequential and problematic’ (Giddens 112-14). The intention here is not to attack the author for his loose conceptualisation but rather to observe how fuzzy the concept becomes when even the smallest attempt is made to concretise it. How, if at all, can we distinguish between ‘circumstances’, ‘moments’ and ‘decisions’ which are fateful? Should fateful moments be understood as comprising ‘episodes’ or ‘situations’? Do these constitute the fateful moment in themselves or is there some further mechanism through which they come to ‘form’ fateful moments? The superficially temporal vocabulary of ‘moments’ and ‘episodes’ in use here obscures the absence of time as an actual variable (Archer 1995: 89) in a manner which is symptomatic of structurationist theory more broadly. The problem here is not the concern with fateful moments<sup>39</sup> but with the operational consequences of ‘fateful moments’ as a conceptual construct.

On a textual level the concept coheres neatly with the broader account of late modernity offered by Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) with ‘fateful moments’ constituting the primary point of intersection between ‘intimacies of the self’ and ‘distant happenings’ (Giddens 1991: 4). But, if anything, this neatness compounds the explanatory inadequacies which ensue when this account is drawn on in the context of empirical research. If, as seems often to be the case, it is applied post-analysis in an attempt to situate findings within a broader account of social change then, as argued in the first chapter, the result is an amalgamation of the macro and

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<sup>39</sup> Which could be described in many other ways. The point is to distinguish between nodal points in biographies and how we seek to conceptualise these.

the micro rather than any meaningful explanatory function. Furthermore, if the account is drawn upon as part of the analytical process then its manifold operational failings become actively deleterious. The various aspects of the concept which Giddens distinguishes more or less explicitly (circumstances, decision making, risk assessment, consulting expert systems, projects of self) coalesce as a loose cluster, with little or no sense forthcoming from the text as to the various modalities through which they may unfold in the context of actual 'fateful moments'.

However this tendency is far from confined to Giddens, though the influence of his work has played a significant role in popularising the notion of 'fateful moments'. The same actualist bias can equally be found in the concept of 'turning points' deployed by Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009) in their study of student transitions during the first year of university at a UK based post-1970s university. As they operationalise the concept:

For the purposes of this study, a turning point is defined as an event(s) or an experience(s) in the first six to eight weeks at university that stands out, and which triggers and results in the student developing (or not) a sense of belonging to university life. There can, therefore, be individual differences in the experience of the turning point, including the development before the transition, the timing of the transition for the individual, the individual's experience of navigating the transition, and the context in which the transition occurs. (Palmer, O'Kane and Owen 2009: 41)

The same difficulty emerges as with the 'fateful moments' concept. Because the status of moments that 'stand out' is inferred retrospectively, the research

unavoidably shifts into an actualist explanatory register: moments which the subject has already subjectively apprehended as 'turning points' become the sole focus of inquiry. While the research team were inventive in their use of plural methods to unpack and contextualise the nature of the turning points that participants recounted, it nonetheless conflates two distinguishable issues: the 'turning point' itself and its subjective significance for the participant. The objection is not to the reliance on the subject as a source of empirical data (as will be true in most, if not all, biographical research) but rather to the construction of 'turning points' solely in terms of the subject's own recognition of them as such.

However some analogous concept is surely desirable for biographical research, particularly when considered in light of the practical tasks involved. In terms of the interview situation much of what has occurred prior to the interview will be unavoidably mundane and of little interest. Some of it will be significant. The process of 'sifting' the latter from the former faces two obstacles. Firstly, it is impossible to discuss every event in the participant's life since the last meeting and any attempt to even approximate this would likely render the interview so tedious as to kill rapport. Secondly, on what basis can the 'mundane' be distinguished from the 'significant'? Concepts such as 'fateful moments' or 'turning points' attempt to address this issue by delineating particularly significant tracts of the life course as a prelude to future inquiry. The criticism being made here is not with this approach per se but rather the conflationary manner in which it is pursued. The identification of objectively consequential 'turning points' is made to depend on the subject's own subjective apprehension of them as such. The ensuing 'turning points' or 'fateful moments' then become the basic unit of analysis leading to the practical difficulties which Plumridge and Thomson (2003) discuss. If the subject's retrospective account

of the event is the focus of inquiry then it becomes difficult to identify the manifold causes in operation to produce the event, with all the constraints and enablements they entailed for the agential doings which ensued from the specific constellation of concerns and prior projects which the participant brought to the situation at hand. Approaching ‘fateful moments’ and ‘turning points’ in this way leads us to take ‘professions of agency at face value’ (Holland and Thomson 2009: 459-64) and, where we avoid this, we do so in spite of rather than because of the concepts in use. This problematic implication is underscored if we consider what Furlong and Cartmel (2006) describe as the ‘epistemological fallacy of late modernity’: the tendency for individualised self-interpretations which ensues from a diversification of individual experience.

Archer's three stage model provides a more useful approach for modelling such ‘fateful moments’ because it allows us to distinguish those aspects which Giddens conflates: prior causal factors (personal, relational, ideational or structural) which make a situation ‘fateful’, apprehension of that situation and its constraints and enablements under the subject’s own terms, decision making in virtue of the subject’s own constellation of concerns, looking to culture for guidance in the exercise of reflexivity (either socio-culturally or to the cultural system) and those projects of self-transformation which may ensue. The mode of operation ensuing from the concept of ‘fateful moments’ is essentially narratological, identifying ‘fateful’ points in personal narratives and using them to explain a linear progression. It is implicitly calling on the interviewee to provide stories and, though there is nothing about stories which precludes material elements (Plummer 1995) susceptible to realist analysis, they should be retreated as retrospective attempts to make sense of objective changes to which the subject responded and their interpretation of the

interplay between them<sup>40</sup>. This is what the three-stage model does, by providing a framework through which it becomes possible to model the architecture of the 'moment' (realist) rather than 'flattening' it by relying on the subject's narration of fateful moments which shaped biographical outcomes (actualist) or indeed simply attempting to 'give voice' to the participant's narrative (empiricist).

1. Structural and cultural properties objectively shape the situations that agents confront involuntarily, and inter alia possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to
2. Subjects' own constellation of concerns, as subjectively defined in relation to three orders of natural reality: nature, practice and the social
3. Courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of subjects who subjectively determine their practical projects in relation to their objective circumstances (Archer 2007: 17)

Instead of conceptualising personal change as a linear movement punctuated by 'fateful' interruptions which reshape the subsequent direction of travel, it can be understood as consisting in a continual and overlapping series of 3-stage movements, with the most subjectively meaningful and/or objectively consequential of these reaching the status of 'fateful moments'. This has the important consequence of detaching such 'moments' from their broader framing by Giddens, the language of which Atkinson (2010: 26) derides as a 'Maslowian therapy-speak vocabulary of self-actualization, self-realization, self-exploration and self-mastery', instead

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<sup>40</sup> Sometimes in ways entirely prompted by the interview situation. This recognition underlies skepticism towards qualitative interviewing (i.e. data is reductively construed as an epiphenomenon of the method) and makes it imperative that qualitative researchers be conceptually clear about the epistemic status of the stories offered by subjects.

construing them in more quotidian terms. What might otherwise be seen as fateful moments come to be seen as particularly momentous instances of a much broader phenomenon.

However putting this alternative approach into analytical practice necessitates two further concepts: psychobiography and personal morphogenesis. The former conceptualises what it is that emerges as a result of ‘fateful moments’ and their less fateful quotidian counterparts, arguing that iterative cycles of three-stage movements shape the unfolding of a lived life over time: how an individual makes their way through the world and how they change in the process. The latter concept analyses how different causal configurations of three-stage movements lead to the reproduction or transformation of the person over time.

## **Psychobiography**

Layder (1997) offers the notion of psychobiography as an attempt to avoid conflationism in understanding individual transitions over the life course. Through recognising the ‘linked series of evolutionary transitions’ which unfold at ‘various significant junctures in the lives of individuals’, the concept aims to tie together ‘both the subjective and objective facts of an individual’s experience’ (Layder 1997: 47). His account draws heavily on Goffman’s notion of ‘moral careers’<sup>41</sup> but, while recognising the centrality of commonality of experience to Goffman’s development of the concept, Layder aims to elaborate an account of psychobiography which privileges neither commonality nor difference; it retains the analytical capacity to ‘recognize shared or common elements in people’s careers’ but not to the ‘exclusion

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<sup>41</sup> See Goffman (1968: 45-55)



of unique configurations of experience' (Layder 1997: 47).

As Layder (1997: 48) goes on to argue 'by focusing on the common features of the social context of careers, sociologists have neglected the psychological dimensions and individual life careers' with an ensuing 'overemphasis on the socially constructed nature of the self as it unfolds over time'. In parallel to this downwards conflation<sup>42</sup>, there is the converse risk of upwards conflation: failing to recognise the efficacy of social structure in conditioning the unfolding of individual psychology over the life course (Archer 1995). The conceptual virtue of psychobiography is its incorporation of subjective and objective - as well as structural and agential - aspects of the social world at a constitutive level. Layder (1997: 50-51) writes that 'by identifying psycho biographies as units of analysis, we are concentrating on the intersection or join between two fundamental features of the human social world'. Without such a conceptual move, identifying the manifold linkages between the personal and social becomes difficult because theorisation therefore proceeds in terms of postulated relationships between phenomena at each level, with the concomitant risk of denying the relative autonomy of either in an attempt to offer a unified explanation. Yet both are efficacious in shaping the unfolding of a life as each individual makes their way through the world (Archer 2007). As Layder (1997: 48) argues:

[T]here is a general need for sociological conceptions of the self to take account of the way in which individual psychology and personality factors interact with the changing personal and social circumstances of the life-career as they unfold over time and affect self identity.

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<sup>42</sup> Denying the autonomy of agency vis-à-vis structure such that, in its most extreme form, individual psychology is seen to be an epiphenomenon of a social role

However, this recognition of the interdependence of the structural and the agential in the unfolding of the life course, while avoiding the errors of upwards and downwards conflation, risks the related problem of central conflation: how are we to move beyond the affirmation of this interdependence so as to unpick and explain this? Addressing this question necessitates we better understand the ‘evolutionary transitions’ invoked by Layder, as well as how they are ‘linked’ into ‘series’. What is changing? What is generative of this change? Addressing this also necessitates that we be clear about precisely what psychobiography is in an ontological sense. As noted, Layder sees psychobiography as a ‘unit of analysis’, intended to sensitise the analyst to the intersections between the psychological and social dimensions of human experience.

Though this is certainly useful in a purely analytical sense, as a means to draw out the temporal dimensions to the psychosocial transitions which a given individual undergoes, this chapter argues that psychobiographies are genuine emergents in their own right and should be treated as such, rather than simply a framework within and through which to understand and unpack the ideographic complexity of a given individual’s biography. In fact, it is difficult to see how the former could be otherwise if the latter is found to prove fruitful as an analytical tool. Goffman (1968: 81) makes an interesting point about the logical status of biographical claims: ‘No matter how big a scoundrel a man is, no matter how false, secretive, or disjointed his existence, or how governed by fits, starts and reversals, the true facts of his activity cannot be contradictory or unconnected with each other’. From a realist standpoint, this epistemological status of biographical claims ensues

from the ontological status of biography itself<sup>43</sup>. This logical interdependence of biographical claims is only intelligible if we accept what MacIntyre (1984: 204-25) describes as the ‘unity of life’. As Sayer (2011: 116) observes ‘people tend to have a sense of “leading a life” which may include moral learning, revising and developing their commitments, a sense of movement combined with trying to control and guide it in a way that makes sense and is valued by them, though of course it may not be controllable’. However explaining this capacity for change necessitates that we treat psychobiography not as the brute fact of self-continuity because, if this were the case, it becomes difficult to see how our past could act causally to constrain or enable us in the present: what is antecedent would come to be a matter of accumulating biographical facts, ensuing from our temporal extension, rather than constituting operative constraints and enablements which outstrip our volition and often our recognition.

The ‘evolutionary transitions’ considered by Layder need to be conceptualised in terms of a real psychobiography, unfolding over the lifecourse, constraining and enabling actions in the present which contribute to its future elaboration or transformation. In doing so, we begin to circumvent the pitfalls attached to the ‘fateful moments’ concept while nonetheless addressing the practical need to identify significant ‘chunks’ of the lifecourse for analysis. Such ‘fateful moments’ can thus be seen as conjunctions of factors<sup>44</sup> generative of the situation a person confronts, with their agentic response acting to reshape self and circumstances in a ways that contribute to the constraints and enablements faced in future ‘fateful moments’. The problem with the ‘fateful moments’ concept is not the

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<sup>43</sup> See also MacIntyre (1984: 204-25)

<sup>44</sup> Conjunctions in the sense that that one ‘fateful moment’, for instance the end of a relationship, in reality represents a complex assemblage of casual factors, unlikely to be homogeneously sequenced, generative of the situation the person now finds themselves confronting.

existence of such fateful moments per se but rather the tendency it inculcates to focus exclusively on the narratives offered by subjects. This confines the explanatory scope to those transitions which have been deemed fateful<sup>45</sup> by subjects and those factors within their discursive penetration. These are not dismissed on the view offered here but rather contextualised within a broader account, seen as subjective narratives of objective transitions; the former can be deployed to help explain the latter but doing so necessitates that we preserve the conceptual distinction between them. However the practical application of such an understanding necessitates that we unpack the nature of these ‘transitions’<sup>46</sup> further.

## **Personal Morphogenesis**

This will involve elaborating a theory of personal morphogenesis, a term coined by Alford (1995), who similarly drew upon Archer’s work in his exploration of the pathways which lead mature students into open access courses. Alford construed personal morphogenesis in terms of the ‘journeys we travel’, understood as a ‘personal morphogenesis of individuals, a biographical movement, related to wider structural and cultural factors, themselves subject to structural and/or cultural morphogenetic change’ (Alford 1995: 21). Such biographical journeys must, he argued, be distinguished from physical journeys because:

[W]hereas the concept of physical journeys means physical movement, from

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<sup>45</sup> There are vast tracts of the lifecourse which contribute to our becoming who we are that are unlikely to be deemed ‘fateful’ by a person.

<sup>46</sup> Our focus is the process itself but explaining the process requires that we distinguish between the different kinds of factors at work so as to unpick the interplay between them (Archer 1995).

A to B, then the concept of biographical journeys centres on personal movement, the changing of personal ideas, as a result of socio-cultural interaction, from thinking one way to thinking another. From such an interactive process, both the traveller and the landscape are changed. (Alford 1995: 53).

On such a view, biographical transitions occur at the level of the individual but are not reducible to the properties and powers of such an individual. Our pathway through the social world is shaped by our prior characteristics and the social circumstances we confront at each given moment in that journey. In turn both our personal characteristics and our social circumstances are shaped, in part and often in ways that outstrip our awareness, through the direction our journey takes. Alford's substantive account focused on what leads people, often later in life, to pursue an Access course, frequently with the goal of university entrance:

The hypothesis is that such decisions are made due to personal changes, anticipated or non-anticipated, in their life situation, such as children settled at school, children left home, redundancy prior to starting the course, ill-health, marital breakdown etc. and that such movement represents the end (and a new beginning) of a personal morphogenetic cycle. The trigger of change, the activation, the crisis, needs to be understood in relation to what had gone before, education and work for instance. Basically the students' lives may well have been culturally knitted together, but faced with sudden change, what appeared to be 'well knitted' can, on reflection, appear to be 'well knotted'. (Alford 1995: 62).

Biographical changes, whether expected or unexpected, welcomed or abhorred, can, and frequently do, carry consequences which outstrip the particularity of the initiating event. Alford (1995) sees certain such changes as ‘catalytic’<sup>47</sup>, giving rise to ‘change or crisis’ in an individual’s life, in a manner which demands a re-evaluation of one’s *modus vivendi*. As he writes, ‘personal crisis can leave our biographical/cultural meaning in tatters, amidst the immensity of the structural environment, which at times of personal crisis, can appear hostile and alien; a state of personal, cultural and structural anomie by any Durkheimian standards’ (Alford 1995: 288). However changes can be catalytic which aren’t construed in terms of crisis, not least of all because the meaning of any such change rests on the psychobiographical trajectory which has led an individual to that point, as well as the habitual interpretive practices that have ensued from this journey<sup>48</sup>. Similarly, the urge to change can pre-exist such a crisis, with the latter providing the opportunity or the impetus for the former, as Alford poignantly describes in the lives of his research participants:

Sometimes by its very nature, routinization begets change, a desire for change that was laying dormant in the mind and cultural experience within the biography of the individual, which may then be triggered into activation by a concatenation of circumstances. Unanticipated crisis can break monotony and bring great change, anticipated change can bring realisation of monotony and bring crisis and bring greater change. The former may sometimes be the

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<sup>47</sup> An evocative phrase which is essentially a non-narratological equivalent to ‘fatefulness’. It must be stressed that not all conditioning factors are ‘catalytic’ in this sense, with Alford’s focus being a consequence of his choice of topic rather than any generalisable theoretical claim on his part.

<sup>48</sup> This point is elaborated upon with reference to the empirical case study in Chapter Seven.

lot of the working class male factory worker, facing redundancy, or the working class woman facing marital breakdown; the latter may be the working class woman enrolling on Access as the children are settled in school, but that very enrolment may unsettle her own life circumstances. (Alford 1995: 319)

It is important to note that the possibility cited in this paragraph by Alford (the possibility of a latent desire for change) is of precisely the sort squeezed out by theoretical fiat if biographical transitions are understood in terms of actualist concepts such as 'turning points' and 'fateful moments'<sup>49</sup>. Within such approaches 'identity work' is seen to follow if and when routinisation is interrupted by external contingencies. Instead, the concepts of psychobiography and personal morphogenesis allow us to identify and unpack underlying dynamics which may not have empirically manifested themselves (yet), permitting analysis to proceed in terms which transcend specific moments of change. This is also why the psychobiographical notion is integral to the present account: it establishes a temporal frame of reference which helps ensure that analysis does not become restricted to the analysis of the particular three-stage movements through which the person is understood to be changing.

Alford's theoretical approach applies Archer's (1988, 1995, 2000) substantial body of work on the morphogenetic approach to studying structure, culture and agency. These terms are defined in a way which draws on, though departs from, the cybernetic systems theory of Walter Buckley and others:

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<sup>49</sup> They are also excluded if, as discussed, we conceptualise psychobiography as the brute fact of self-continuity. It is only if we recognise the emergent nature of psychobiography that we can make sense of the role played by the sequencing of what would otherwise be construed as 'flat' biographical facts in shaping the psychobiographical trajectories.

Thus ‘Morphogenesis’ refers to ‘those processes which tend to elaborate or change a system’s given form, state or structure’. Conversely ‘morphostasis’ refers to those processes in complex system-environmental exchanges which tend to preserve or maintain a system’s given form, organization or state. (Archer 1995: 166).

**Personal morphostasis** involves personal, relational, ideational and structural factors which, individually or in some combination, engender the reproduction of intrapersonal structures (character, concerns, projects).

**Personal morphogenesis** involves personal, relational, ideational and structural factors which, individually or in some combination, engender the transformation of intrapersonal structures (character, concerns, projects).

Over any given period of time, countless cycles of both are empirically superimposed within a given subject’s psychobiography. However the delineation of morphogenetic cycles becomes possible because, although any individual’s insight into the processes driving their psychobiographical unfolding is unavoidably corrigible, everyone has some awareness of past and present processes of personal change under their own descriptions. Cycles of personal morphogenesis involve intersecting factors across multiple domains (personal, relational, ideational and structural) which converge to create ‘issues’ which demand personal resolution.

Such issues become pressing because of the relationship between our situation and our concerns (Archer 2000, 2003). The notion of ‘concern’ has a



double meaning, as Maccarini (2011: 110) writes it denotes 'what inescapably concerns us, calls for our attention and presses us to deal with (something we cannot simply ignore), and what we care about, what we are ideally engaged in'. We can, he argues, summarise both meanings by defining concern as 'what is urging us'. The notion of 'issues' is offered as an attempt to represent these existential urgencies in a manner susceptible to empirical investigation: an issue is a topic which recurrently occupies the deliberations of a subject for some finite tract of time. It does so because structural and/or cultural factors antecedent to a situation have shaped what the subject now confronts in such a way as to invite a response given their specific constellation of personal concerns at that time. Not all situations and/or all concerns produce 'issues', it is only when the former in some way poses questions in virtue of the latter that this designation becomes appropriate. Where there is an issue, there is some prior structural and/or cultural factor at work, or constellation thereof. In some cases these initiating causes might be obviously, indeed potentially catastrophically, catalytic in the sense that Alford (1995) describes but, in others, it is simply a spur to reflexivity: Something has changed, the significance of it may not yet be satisfactorily articulated, however internal conversation begins to turn to the 'issue' in question. In contrast Giddens (1984, 1991) treats the process of 'issues' coming recurrently to mind entirely in terms of psychic (mal)adaptation to changes in personal life and social life, which are understood to disrupt the 'cocoon' of ontological security which generally allows the subject to bracket 'existential' questions and proceed with the practical business of living. If we accept Archer's (2003, 2007) arguments about the ubiquity of reflexivity in its various modes then this recourse to psychoanalytical explanation by Giddens comes to seem fascinatingly extreme. It would obviously be a mistake to deny the possibility of

pathological status being legitimately imputed to the involuntary recurrence of certain deliberative topics but the ontological commitments of Giddens mean this category comes to be drawn absurdly broadly<sup>50</sup>. The involuntariness may pose problems and cause distress<sup>51</sup>, but this does not in itself demand psychoanalytical explanation. In fact this phenomenology of obsessiveness, a persistent struggle with terminating internal conversations, represents an important aspect (in different ways) of the experience of meta-reflexivity and fractured reflexivity<sup>52</sup>.

Behavioural orientation towards ‘issues’ varies across subjects, in a way shaped, though not determined, by the individual’s mode of reflexivity, as well as perhaps varying in different sectors of an individual’s life e.g. one might be strategic in responding to such ‘issues’ in one’s working life and evasive towards them in one’s home life. Similarly how such ‘issues’ are framed in one’s internal conversation, as well as dialogues with external others, varies as a result of the psychobiographical history that has led an individual to this point. In these terms, the initiating causes might have their morphogenetic impact entirely through ideational means, for instance if a cultural or social encounter leads one to encounter and consider a cultural resource which disrupts someone’s perception of their current *modus vivendi* and the appeal of it. Attempts to resolve such an ‘issue’ can take place over long tracts of time. While such an issue is ‘live’, it is a recurrent topic of internal conversation for the subject, though sometimes framed in ways which are only partially explicit e.g. an individual might be preoccupied with emotional consequences while the issue itself eludes their deliberative awareness. They may

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<sup>50</sup> For the reasons discussed in the first chapter.

<sup>51</sup> See Archer (2012: 226) for an interesting example.

<sup>52</sup> Both struggle with bringing deliberations to a close but for different reasons. Meta-reflexive deliberations will tend to spiral, given the continual possibility of reframing the ‘problem’ and further inquiry into self and circumstances (e.g. “do I really need this footnote? Why have I started writing so many footnotes recently?”), whereas fractured deliberations will tend to lack any purposiveness.

seek reflexive guidance from different sources in helping to resolve such an issue. If and when such a resolution does occur, it involves a transformation of personhood (sometimes hugely significant, often entirely quotidian) which stands as an antecedent condition for subsequent cycles. In this way antecedent personal characteristics stand as a context of action, within which personal morphogenesis occurs, in that they constrain and enable ensuing processes of personal change.

## **The Broader Project**

This chapter has completed the critique of Giddens (1979, 1984, 1991) initiated at the start of the thesis, arguing that his work exhibits underlying deficiencies which make it singularly unsuited to the tasks to which many researchers have sought to marshal its intellectual resources. Much of the difficulty stems from the superficially illuminating quality that characterises this later body of work (Giddens 1990, 1991, 1992) on late modernity and detraditionalisation, with its tendency to foreground compelling and important issues pertaining to personal life and social change but also to shut down the explanatory space within which these issues could be concretely explored. The aim of the thesis thus far has been to critique these ideas in order to illuminate the underlying issues which are at stake. In doing so, the theoretical groundwork has been prepared for the main purpose of the project: using an empirical case study to develop an analytical framework for studying processes of personal change in a way that is adequate to the broader challenges of understanding social change.

## **Chapter 4. Research Methods and Research Design**

The research design was longitudinal, incorporating an initial survey component which was then used as a basis to recruit participants for two years of recurrent qualitative interviewing. Given the concern for change over time, longitudinal interviewing facilitated a form of engagement with the lives of participants which was valuable in spite of the logistical limitations entailed by it. These were in-depth interviews, semi-structured for the first round and subsequently unstructured. The data is presented in the fifth and sixth chapters. The former proceeds typologically, analysing the continuities and discontinuities between trajectories into higher education, in terms of modes of reflexivity, with the explanatory focus resting upon the characteristics of familial and peer relations in the natal context. The latter takes the form of case studies, analysing how each participant became the person they were at the end of the fieldwork, delineating cycles of personal change and the mechanisms generative of them.

The purpose of the research was exploratory, using the cases as a means to elaborate upon and refine the approach to the analysis of personal change which was introduced in the first section of this thesis. While all efforts were made to maximise diversity within the sample, the intention of the exercise was to ‘sharpen’ theoretical concepts through engagement with real lives and the choices made in the sampling should be seen in this light.

### **Epistemological Considerations**

The epistemic difficulty involved in researching reflexivity is, in principle, no different ‘from those which always attend interview or survey research’ (Archer 2007: 155). It is an instance of the double hermeneutic, involving the interpretation of interpreting persons (Archer 2003: 154). However rather than construe it as an issue that calls into question the validity of investigating a profoundly under-explored domain of human life<sup>53</sup>, our focus should turn to the conditions under which we might minimise the ever-present possibility of interpretative error. What sort of labour is required to increase the chances of successful interpretation in spite of the double hermeneutic? This sort of ‘work’ is a ubiquitous part of daily life. Indeed so ubiquitous that we may often be unaware of it. As S. P. Turner (2010: 164) puts it:

When we deal with other people, we are constantly doing precisely what the anthropologist is doing: we are interpreting their behavior, revising our interpretations in light of our attempts to make sense of it, and attributing beliefs to them. These attributions often include error hypotheses. We could not function as language users or human beings without doing this. Making intelligible is a continuous process. Making inferences about what someone intends to mean, whether they are sincere, ironic, speaking metaphorically, or erroneously, is ubiquitous, and a part of every human interaction.

He goes on to argue that contemporary neuroscience provides a mechanism which can account for this process and, crucially, how we get it right. The ‘mirroring system’ of human beings is active ‘both in the performance of actions and in the

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<sup>53</sup> Once which has tended to slip between the gap left by the disciplinary boundaries of sociology and psychology (Layder 1997: 51).

perception of actions'. On the basis of 'very modest' observational cues, the mirroring system is able to 'identify motions and emotions of certain kinds' (Turner 2010: 176). Our capacity to identify with others, 'putting ourselves their shoes', grows from our own practical experience of comparable states via an increasingly well-understood neurophysiological mechanism. Our underlying capacity to assume the perspective of another renders interpretive error a local matter of more or less rather than a global matter of zero-sum. It is, as Turner puts it, 'a default response that improves through feedback, the kind of feedback we receive in social interactions and in interaction with the world itself' (S. P. Turner 2010: 177).

Longitudinal research increases the possibility of such feedback, in so far as it entails a form of interaction which allows issues to be clarified, understandings to be refined and interpretive repertoires to be developed in a reciprocal way. The claim being made here is not that this in itself renders internal conversation knowable but rather that such conditions work, in an entirely quotidian fashion, to minimise communicative error. What is being communicated is an account of past action by the subject, and more specifically contextually bound internal speech acts. These are one instance of a broader category of 'covert mental acts' which 'lack behavioural manifestations' (Archer 2003: 23). Such internal conversations are ontologically subjective, in that their mode of existence depends on the deliberating subject, but epistemically objective in Searle's (1995) sense of the terms. For instance Searle uses the example of pain as emblematic of this category:

We can see the distinction between the distinctions clearly if we reflect on the fact that we can make epistemically subjective statements about entities that are ontologically objective, and similarly, we can make epistemically

objective statements about entities that are ontologically subjective. For example, the statement 'Mt. Everest is more beautiful than Mt. Whitney' is about ontologically objective entities, but makes a subjective judgement about them. On the one hand, the statement 'I now have a pain in my lower back' reports an epistemically objective fact in the sense that it is made true by the existence of an actual fact that is not dependent on any stance, attitudes, or opinions of observers. However, the phenomenon itself, the actual pain, has a subjective mode of existence. (Searle 1995).

Reporting on internal conversation is nonetheless distinguishable from reporting on pain. Firstly, it is retrospective, given that in an interview situation, the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee concerns past internal conversations and their situational correlates which have shaped and been shaped by them. Secondly, the internal conversations have a cognitive content that pain does not. They are susceptible to subsequent interpretation, most strikingly by meta-reflexives, in a manner which renders the reports far from incorrigible. The relationship between the retrospective report and its object referents may be imprecise but this does not, in itself, constitute a basis to question the objectivity of that referent. Not least of all because of the frequency with which individuals do spontaneously report on inner speech acts, usually as part of recounting a broader scene within which those speech acts are bound up with objective referents. For instance, as Paula described her increasing distress during a 1st year examination:

And the exam was like an essay, a problem question and then you could do another essay or a problem question and all the essay questions were all the

areas that I missed. And I just sat there, I was like ‘oh my god, this is going to be a painful three hours’. So I whacked out the problem questions and then I just sat there, I wrote like a page and I was like ‘I’m going to cry if I sit here any longer’. So I just left after two hours.

What is being asserted here is the generic capacity of human subjects to be knowledgeable about their internal speech acts qua acts, as well as their capacity to successfully communicate this knowledge conversationally to others. This does not entail the incorrigibility of these accounts, only that inaccuracy and error are a local rather than a global matter. What is being communicated in the interview situation is a person’s retrospective accounting for past internal speech acts. We only have to accept the authority of the speaker to report on their mental life (Archer 2003: 50), as opposed to an untenable assertion of the veridicality of such claims.

Another characteristic of our inner speech is its contextual boundedness, in the sense that we take for granted a certain mental topography which is dependent upon characteristics of the external environment (Archer 2007: 73-86). An important consequence of sharing an institutional and geographical context with participants, as well as having been within it for a number of years before they began university, was the partially shared mental topography this entailed. As Archer (2007: 84) writes of those who share contextual continuity:

In such cases, the internal conversations of these subjects are context dependent, as are everyone’s, but with the hugely important difference that much of their respective dependency has the same contextual references. So many factors are shared by them - common acquaintances, history and



biography, unchanging geography, familiarity with the same schools, hospitals, churches, factories, employers, pubs, buildings and a common fund of anecdotes, idioms and local knowledge. These furnish a mental landscape with the same topographical features. Provided that people retain and sustain this 'contextual continuity', their communality of landmarks together with their experiential overlap facilitates the sharing of their internal conversations. To use Piaget's term, 'de-centering', or the cognitive ability to assume the perspective of each other in external speech, is rendered much easier. Someone's conversational extensions (the translations of their internal conversations) may be unintentionally 'egocentric', as is usual, but the difference here is that their egocentricity also happens to be very similar to that of their interlocutors.

Clegg and Stevenson (2013) makes a related point about the nature of 'interview data' in higher education research, arguing that the embedding of the researcher within the context being researched lends such investigations a rarely acknowledged ethnographic component, with interpretation and analysis inevitably drawing upon cultural resources which are prior to the research itself. Nonetheless, there were clearly limits to the contextual continuity I shared with participants. Firstly, I had been in the area and in attendance at the institution for two years before they began university. Secondly, I was at a very different stage of my education and had done an undergraduate degree at a very different university, in a subject that was not represented amongst my participants, while living in a very different part of the country. Thirdly, although the campus environment is strikingly insular in some respects, the form and content of any participant's life was not exhausted by their

enrolment at the university, no more than was my own. Nonetheless, there did exist an obvious shared mental landscape, the effect of which can perhaps be discerned in the fact that, with one exception, the strongest rapport developed in the fieldwork was with students within my own department.

## **Methodological Considerations**

Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) has emerged out of a considerable literature and has identifiable roots in a number of disciplines (Holland, Thomson and Henderson 2006: 4). However practitioners caution against imposing a false unity upon this cluster of approaches. Farrall's definition is helpful: 'QLR embodies a range of mainly in-depth interview-based studies which involved return to interviewees to measure and explore changes which occur over time and the processes associated with these changes' (Farrall 1996: 2). By its nature QLR is extremely time and resource intensive. This inevitably shaped the research design, with the pragmatic caution of supervisors playing a crucial role in keeping the project manageable. An initial intention to interview participants on a rolling basis, guided by minimum and maximum frequencies of one month and three months respectively, was scaled back to a commitment to conduct one interview per term. However, as Farrall (1996) notes, qualitative longitudinal studies are by their nature prospective rather than retrospective and certain epistemic virtues flow from this. He contends that retrospective studies 'can be influenced by a respondent's failure to recall events or the correct ordering of events' which 'also leave themselves open to deliberate distortions as respondents attempt to imbue their actions with a rationality which they did not have at the time' (Farrall 1996: 6). In contrast prospective studies

are able to make use of a developing record of knowledge about participants and, furthermore, provide precisely the sort of feedback that Turner identifies as integral to the minimisation of communicative error.

In terms of the empirical case study undertaken, examining the changes undergone by a cohort of students in their first two years at university, recurrent qualitative interviews allowed a perspective on these changes that would otherwise have been unfeasible. It served to foreground processes rather than isolated moments (Plumridge and Thomson 2003) and allowed the identification of dynamics which would have otherwise been unclear. The choice of university students was to a certain extent pragmatic, as their proximity helped alleviate some of the logistical pressures ensuing from pursuing research of this form. However the cultural continuities which a shared university ensured between participants (as well as between researcher and participants) also served a theoretical purpose, elucidating the divergent modes of interaction between selves and settings by foregrounding how people responded dissimilarly to often similar circumstances. Nonetheless, this choice of context and subjects entailed obvious limitations, with the most pressing issue being the constitution of the sample. As will be discussed, representativeness was neither expected nor aimed for. Even so, the sample precludes generalisability, given the multiple phases of self-selection involved in students within a particular population ultimately coming to participate in the study, as well as the social selection involved in students coming to be students within this population. This is why it is important to remember the avowed limitations of the case study, only ever intended to be theoretico-empirical in a manner constituting a middle ground between philosophical anthropology and empirical sociology. While this addresses the strongest criticism which could be raised about this research design, namely that

it establishes nothing about anything beyond the particular cases presented, it nonetheless begs the question in some associated respects. This underlying issue of how particular these case studies are cannot ultimately be settled, at least not within the confines of this thesis. It can be argued that the study of how these people changed over this particular tract of their life course offers no basis to make claims about personal change as such. However the intention here was to use these case studies to ‘sharpen up’ conceptual tools for thinking about personal change, as opposed to offering a substantive theory per se. It stands in contrast to the wholly or partially fictionalised vignettes found in authors such as Sennett (1998) and Elliott and Lemert (2009), serving a loosely homologous though more systematic function, while nonetheless being grounded in real lives. It is intended as an extension of what Gabb (2011) describes as using ‘fragments of lived experiences’ to help ‘articulate, understand and describe’, instead seeing those fragments as intrinsically linked (psychobiographically) and using their analysis to understand the causal factors generative of the sequences of this linking (personal morphogenesis). Furthermore, it does so in a way which refines these concepts (the emergent whole and its relational constitutions) in the process of deploying them.

Another limitation to the case study was its length. The difficulty here is that change takes time to emerge (Farrall 1996: 5). This fundamentally logistical difficulty certainly constitutes a weakness of the case study but from a morphogenetic perspective<sup>54</sup> it remains the case that the points at which cycles of change conclude cannot be predicted in advance. So while it might have been desirable to have continued the fieldwork beyond the two years, this would not have

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<sup>54</sup> See Chapter Seven

avoided the outcome of the interview process stopping mid-cycle as was the case with the majority of participants.

However while these issues were considered in advance, an unexpected limitation encountered was with the interview method itself. While ‘significant others’ of various sorts were always expected to constitute large tracts of the interview discussion, the frequency with which these discussions raised important questions about these others and the relations forcefully illustrated the limitations inherent in interviewing. The point here is not about the partiality of the subject’s perspective, though this is certainly the case, rather it is to stress the reality of the relation itself (Donati 2011) and the limitations imposed by a research design incorporating only one party to it. Overcoming these difficulties would necessitate much methodological ingenuity but doing so is imperative for there to be progress in our understanding of the relational constitution of reflexivity, particularly in terms of its developmental dynamics (Archer 2012).

There is an obvious elective affinity between the concerns of the morphogenetic approach and the recurrent concerns of QLR. As Corden and Millar (2007: 585) succinctly observe, ‘looking for evidence and understanding of change by studying processes and experience over time requires careful thought about what we understand by using the language of “time” and “change”’. This is precisely what the morphogenetic approach can provide, as an explanatory framework for analysing change over time (Archer 1995). But the continuities should not be overstated here. Firstly, QLR cannot be reduced to particular methods or be claimed as a discrete methodology, rather constituting something of an umbrella term for a range of similar approaches. Secondly, many proponents of QLR see it in terms of a turn to the ‘immediacy and vitality of everyday experiences’ for reasons driven by

theoretical commitments at odds with the morphogenetic approach (Neale and Flowerdew 2010). These authors go on to criticise quantitative longitudinal approaches which focus on ‘spells of time, which follow (or deviate from) a presumed linear sequence of stages in the life course’ with their ensuing tendency to ‘turn the movie into a series of disjointed pictures or movie “stills”’. They argue that ‘because time is harnessed to statistically significant trends in behaviour and practices, individual dynamics and the linked lives and relational thinking with which they are bound up become relevant only in so far they illuminate these wider trends’ (Neal and Flowerdew 2010: 191-2). Their response to this intellectual tendency<sup>55</sup>, influenced by a broadly postmodern sensibility (described in terms of the ‘cultural turn’ and the ‘textural turn’) looks to counterbalance this panoramic neglect of individual lives with a renewed focus on time and texture: ‘[T]he subjective meanings and active crafting of social relationships, cultural practices and personal identities and practices’ (Neale and Flowerdew: 192). Though there exists resistance to the voluntaristic elements which can often creep into these accounts with such concerns, it is precisely this intersection between ‘time and texture’ which is of interest for the present project and why there is a goodness of fit between the morphogenetic approach and QLR in spite of the aforementioned qualifications. QLR serves to highlight questions about the ‘timing and sequence of life course phases and transitions’ (Corden and Millar 2007: 586) which the present project has sought to address, arguing we must replace notions of ‘fateful moments’ and ‘turning points’ with a more general account of how persons change over time that can then, in turn, be used to address nodal points of this sort as one biographical feature amongst others within a person’s life.

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<sup>55</sup> Which, it should be stressed, they do not reject, only call for a renewed emphasis upon its qualitative counterpart (Neale and Flowerdew 2010: 198)

## **Sampling**

I began conducting my fieldwork at the start of the second year of my part-time study. This involved the use of the ICONI survey instrument<sup>56</sup> to collect scores for different modes of reflexivity, information about those areas of their life deemed most important and demographic data from 285 first year undergraduate students at the University of Warwick. ICONI also allowed respondents to indicate a willingness to participate further in the research. The intention here was to maximise biographical diversity within this shared context and so participants were recruited across a number of academic departments. The survey was distributed and collected in core first year modules for four departments at the university: Sociology, English Literature, Physics and Warwick Business School. I negotiated access by identifying compulsory modules for first years in each of these departments before contacting the academic leader for each module. I explained my project, the intentions behind it and what distributing the survey would entail for the lecture itself. In each case, the lecturer or seminar leader introduced me, though the degree of context they provided for students varied widely. I described the survey as ‘research about decision-making’ which was examining ‘internal monologues’ and distributed the surveys. These were then processed and entered into an Excel spreadsheet to facilitate the sampling strategy. Figure 1 shows the overall results across departments and figure 2 shows the gender composition of respondents:

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<sup>56</sup> See Archer (2007: 326-36) for more information about the development of ICONI. All quantitative scores stated refer to ICONI results.

Figure 1: Modes of reflexivity amongst ICONI respondents<sup>57</sup>

	<b>Sociology</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>English Lit</b>	<b>Physics</b>
Communicative	16.67%	14.52%	15.79%	13.04%
Autonomous	28.43%	37.1%	21.05%	40.58%
Meta-Reflexive	21.57%	25.81%	39.48%	21.74%
Fractured	20.59%	14.52%	15.79%	10.14%
Other	12.75%	8.06%	7.89%	14.49%

Figure 2: Gender composition amongst ICONI respondents

	<b>Sociology</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>English Lit</b>	<b>Physics</b>
Male	16	26	11	54
Female	77	30	26	13
Total Population	102	62	38	69

Four complicating factors immediately became apparent. Firstly, the size of the groups in question varied widely, as did the completion rate for ICONI<sup>58</sup>. Secondly, it was only possible to gain access to seminars within the English Literature department. The former issue was intensified by the latter. Thirdly, upon return of the surveys, the degree to which the dual honours system and elective element complicated the ascription of degree course became clear. Fourthly, the percentage of respondents expressing willingness to participate in the further stages of the project was much higher in Sociology (around 40%) than in other departments.

<sup>57</sup> 'Other' includes tied scores and those who failed to score above 4 on any particular mode. See Archer (2012: 277-90).

<sup>58</sup> Sociology (n=102), Business (n=61), English Literature (n=38) and Physics (n=69)



Given that my initial aim had been to maximise biographical diversity, this was not intrinsically problematic. However it did create difficulties in virtue of my sampling strategy, which had been designed as a cluster approach relating to scores for different modes of reflexivity (specifically those with high scores, tied score or low scores<sup>59</sup>) as well as attempting to maximise diversity based upon the socio-demographic data collected. The ICONI results and biographical details for willing participants were extracted from the spreadsheet and used to construct a sampling frame for each of the four departments. Those who had indicated a willingness to be interviewed but then failed to leave contact details were excluded. Figure 3 shows the resulting sampling frame:

Figure 3: Sampling frame used to approach interviewees

	Sociology	Business	English Lit	Physics
Communicative	7	2	4	0
Autonomous	13	5	2	2
Meta-Reflexive	10	4	5	10
Fractured	9	3	1	1
Other	4	2	0	5

Figure 4: Gender constitution of the sampling frame across departments

	Sociology	Business	English Lit	Physics
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<sup>59</sup> This followed from an interest in the developmental dynamics of reflexivity, assuming that scores of this kind would constitute (fallible) indicators for different modes of operation.

Male	7	6	3	15
Female	36	10	9	3

Theoretical criteria were used to construct an initial contact list, selecting those with high, tied or low ICONI scores, distributed across the four departments while seeking to maximise diversity using the (admittedly limited) socio-demographic criteria available. An initial e-mail was sent to each of these potential participants, reminding them of the survey and explaining the project. The proposal was non-committal, inviting them to discuss potential participation with me, as opposed to agreeing to participate via e-mail. The time commitment was indicated, as was my flexibility about where and when the interviews could be conducted. Only two of an initial twenty contacted ultimately came to participate in the project, with the others either declining or failing to respond to the e-mail. This process was repeated, with the contact list being expanded after a window of time had elapsed, with the result that the sampling frame was quickly exhausted, particularly in terms of the distribution across departments. This phase of the sampling process seems distinctly unsuccessful in retrospect, though it was perhaps just the length of the commitment (at this stage intended to be three-years) which was unappealing.

The interviews were used to refine the ICONI classifications, though the disjuncture between quantitative and qualitative evidence begged the question of whether this was an artefact of ICONI or a consequence of the months which intervened between administering the surveys and beginning the interviews. The tables below show modes of reflexivity at the time of the first interview, as well as the degree course for which they were registered. The subjects not introduced heretofore (Law and Psychology) are a consequence of students from these degrees

being present in the sociology lecture in which ICONI was administered. Even allowing for this, it is undeniable that Sociology is overrepresented within the sample; subjects from this group were far more willing to participate, in terms both of indicating this on ICONI and agreeing to participate when invited via e-mail.

Figure 6: Modes of reflexivity amongst the interviewees at start of fieldwork

Communicative	Autonomous	Meta-Reflexive	Fractured
John	Sarah	James	Stephen
Jess	Hannah	Tom	Paul
Kirsty	Naomi	Jen	Holly
	Jane	Mary	Anna
	Nadia	Caroline	

Figure 7: Biographical details for interviewees<sup>60</sup>

Name	Age	Degree	Mode
Sarah	18	Law	A
Paul	18	Physics	F
Stephen	18	Psychology	F
John	19	Sociology	C
James	18	Physics	MR
Tom	19	Physics	MR

<sup>60</sup> Data collected for Nationality and Parental Occupation, used as a sampling variable, has been excluded here to preserve anonymity.

Hannah	19	English Literature	A
Holly	21	Business	F
Jen	19	Sociology	MR
Mary	19	Sociology	MR
Naomi	19	English Literature	A
Jane	18	Law and Sociology	A
Jess	18	Sociology	C
Kirsty	18	Sociology	C
Nadia	19	Sociology	A
Caroline	19	Sociology	MR
Anna	18	Sociology	F

Unfortunately Sarah stopped responding to e-mail contact after the first year of fieldwork. After a number of unanswered e-mails, I assumed this constituted withdrawal and sent her a final e-mail wishing her well and reiterating the anonymity of the data. I then sought to recruit additional participants through snowball sampling, with the intention of compensating for Sarah's withdrawal while also redressing the disciplinary balance from beyond the original sample. In these cases,

the first two interview schedules were compressed in order to 'catch up' with other cases. Unfortunately, this was only successful with one of the three participants recruited. In the two other cases, we were ultimately unable to schedule enough interview time for this to constitute a meaningful part of the project and therefore they have been excluded from the analysis.

## **Interview Design**

The interviews began in the second academic term of the first year of fieldwork. ICONI was distributed during the first term of this year and interviewees were contacted soon after this. As a preliminary to the initial interviews I used a biographical datasheet, again developed by Archer (2007), as a means of collecting biographical data which helped structure and focus the initial interviews. I developed a semi-structured interview schedule partly based on that used by Archer (2003, 2007) and adapted on the basis of my own theoretical interests and conversations with her about her experiences when conducting similar interviews. I subsequently tested and refined this interview schedule through a number of pilot interviews. I maintained contact with the interviewees through e-mail and text message. As a venue for the initial interview, they were offered a choice between a room booked through central timetabling, their on campus accommodation and one of the campus's social venues at a quiet time of day.

The length of the initial interviews varied from forty minutes to three hours. Subsequent rounds of interviews tended to be shorter, though there were exceptions to this. The first interview had three sections. The first drew on Archer's (2003, 2007) approach and presented participants with a sequence of reflexive activities:

- Planning
- Rehearsing
- Mulling Over
- Deciding
- Reliving
- Prioritising
- Imagining
- Clarifying
- Imaginary Conversations
- Budgeting

Participants were asked if they engaged in each of these activities. If so, they were invited to discuss it or give examples. On a number of occasions, participants asked for clarification about the mental activity in question, illustrating the risk of conflating the mental activity and the concept through which we refer to it.

The second section of the initial interview began with a broad and open-ended question: “who are you?” The inspiration for this came from Porpora (2003) and, with one exception in which the interviewee’s response concerned his own analysis of my intentions<sup>61</sup>, it proved an effective and often disarming way of beginning an open-ended conversation. As a strategy it bore obvious similarities to Wengraf’s (2001) ‘single question aimed at inducing narrative’ but this notion was only encountered midway through the fieldwork. While Wengraf’s seeming tendency to claim ownership over what is surely a longstanding research strategy is problematic, there is certainly value in his emphasis upon the careful crafting of such

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<sup>61</sup> This immediate turn towards analysis of why I had asked the question and what my intentions were was strikingly indicative of the participant’s tendency towards meta-reflexivity.

a question. The third section of the interview began with an open-ended invitation to recount what their life was like before they moved to university. The intention in the second and third sections of the interview was to encourage participants to elaborate freely, allowing them to shape the direction of the dialogue. I used a mental checklist of topics which I intended to cover in each section, relating to university and their natal context in turn. This sometimes involved a gentle steering process, identifying openings in the conversation where necessary in order to nudge it in the direction of a particular topic. However the topics in question (e.g. apply to university, moving into halls of residence, school(s), family life etc.) were so quotidian as to be broached spontaneously in most cases, with my intention being to listen attentively and ask questions which invited the interviewee to elaborate.

The second round of interviews were prepared with a similar checklist, relating to topics relevant to the transition from the second to third term of their first year of university. However in many cases this felt artificial in a way that had not been true of the first round of interviews, suggesting divergent trajectories as people began to respond dissimilarly to common stimuli. As the interviews progressed, the formality of a prepared checklist was increasingly discarded and replaced with a review process prior to each interview. The priority here was to ensure that 'issues' (conflicts with hall mates, family problems, nascent romances, dissatisfaction with modules etc.) were discussed, with a particular emphasis on their temporal extension. It was often the case that what had been a pressing issue at the previous interview was, once raised on a subsequent occasion, no longer a concern. However the interpretative challenge came from exploring how an 'issue' could change shape, as striving towards agential resolution changed self and circumstances in a way which came to constitute something distinct though related.

Longitudinal interviewing carries a risk of repetitiveness or habitualisation, on the part of interview and/or interviewee. As Farrall (1996: 17) observes, ‘careful thought needs to be given to interviews, so that the interviewing style does not become too repetitive or respondents conditioned to particular questions’. In a small number of cases, this did seem to become a problem over the research period, as the process began to feel somewhat rote and hollow, with a reciprocal commitment to the interviews sustaining ongoing meetings with an ever more glaring absence of rapport. In such cases, I asked similar sorts of questions and received similar sorts of responses, resulting in interviews which were recurrently and reliably short (less than fifteen minutes on some occasions) relative to the widely variable interview length which characterised meetings with many of the other participants. In retrospect, a more regular practice of review<sup>62</sup> might have allowed me to pick this up as an issue much earlier. The full extent of it as a problem was only obvious to me when listening to the interview recording after the fieldwork had been completed, with the lively and extended dialogues with many participants drawing attention to the perfunctory character of some of the exchanges. In such cases, it might have been possible to arrest this decline into routine exchange by more ‘tailored’ preparation for such interviews, in spite of how time-intensive this can be (Farrall 1996: 17).

The interviews were approached as ‘dialogues rather than closed-ended surveys’ in the manner of Porpora (2003). As he notes, ‘feminist scholars have long urged sociologists to drop the pretence of a rigid separation between observer and observed, to admit that scientific research is actually a dialogue with the world, a

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<sup>62</sup> The difficulty experienced in finding time to step back and systematically take stock of the progress of the fieldwork perhaps illustrates that the empirical project should have been undertaken on a smaller scale, given the logistical constraints under which I was working.



dialogue in which observer and observed both participate' (Porpora 2003: 7). Another tradition resembling this is what Merrill and West (2014) describe as a 'relational' approach to interviewing, with an emphasis on 'attentiveness, respectfulness and of the need to take time with the other, to build a relationship of trust'. However the psychoanalytical strategies of the latter tradition (the analysis of transference and counter-transference etc.) seem ethically and methodologically problematic when undertaken outside of a clinical setting (Merrill and West 2014: 317)<sup>63</sup>. Furthermore, the notion that the affective responses of research should be considered as an analytical resource should be treated with caution, not because affectivity is taken to be meaningless but rather given the nature of affectivity itself<sup>64</sup>. The empirical case study was intended to incorporate aspects of this approach while rejecting others. In particular, while it was held that interviewing was a relational process<sup>65</sup>, recognising the participants as 'conversational collaborators' and rejecting the role of 'interviewer-as-cipher' (Archer 2003: 162), this does not change the paradoxically asymmetric form of reciprocity which characterised the interview process. This is something a number of participants<sup>66</sup> remarked upon at points, describing it as occasionally 'weird' how one-sided the exchange could be, with one worrying that it sometimes seemed rude for her never to ask me questions. When encountering such a reaction I reiterated my own interest in their lives and, if it seemed suitable, how this interest was grounded in the broader project of my PhD. Exchanges of this sort would seem to be much more likely in the

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<sup>63</sup> Though this is not intended as any sort of blanket criticism of psychological or psychoanalytical approaches. The former in particular is a valuable source of insight (Holland, Thomson and Henderson 2006: 9). The objection to the latter is the appropriation of psychoanalytical concepts and their deployment, often in a far from structured way, outside of a clinical setting.

<sup>64</sup> See Archer (2000: 193-221)

<sup>65</sup> Particularly for longitudinal interviewing of this sort, in which a relationship develops over two years, often punctuated by a complete lack of contact between interviews.

<sup>66</sup> Interestingly with those I felt I had the most well established rapport.

context of longitudinal interviewing, as an emerging comfort within the research relationship makes it possible to articulate things which otherwise have remained unsaid and/or unarticulated.

## **Data Analysis**

The process of analysis was complicated by the nature of the case study itself. Given that its purpose was to facilitate the development of framework for analysis, it was impossible to commit to a particular analytical strategy in advance. The temporal extension of the research process helps circumvent the difficulties which might otherwise have been posed by this, allowing what was always going to be an iterative process of development to occur in phases.

The first phase of data analysis was undertaken during the summer following the first year of fieldwork. The first year of interviews was transcribed and then imported into an NVivo database which had heretofore been used solely for organising notes and biographical materials pertaining to the participants. Given the reliance of the project upon an existing body of work with strong theoretical commitments, an initial array of key concepts from this literature (pertaining to modes of reflexivity, types of context and types of mental activity) were used as initial codes through which to engage with the transcripts. This was then supplemented through an emergent process of coding, in which new categories were generated before being intermittently reviewed and incorporated into the existing coding structure, merging or branching as continuities and discontinuities were recognised between existing categories.

The point of this exercise was to ‘open up’ the initial set of transcripts,

informed by an understanding of the software as primarily being a sophisticated system for data storage, organisation and retrieval (Bazeley and Jackson 2013: 76). The risk here is that the coding process can be extended indefinitely, going far beyond what has analytical utility, simply because the software makes such activity so easy (Walsh 2002). There also a tendency for software like NVivo to incline one towards undertaking ever more of the project within it, with other possibilities likely to be foreclosed by this (Crowley, Harre and Tagg 2002). Thus this process was discontinued after this point was reached. Therefore beyond its storage and retrieval function, NVivo was only used to generate themes and concepts which could then be fed back into the ongoing process of fieldwork. These emergent themes helped elucidate areas of interest and the relations obtaining between them; particularly through unpacking the relationship between concerns and context (Archer 2003, 2007) in thematic terms. For instance, experiences of 'disruption', 'growth', 'change', 'adaptation' and 'guidance' which provoked broader conceptual questions concerning reflexivity and biography, in spite of the limitation on generalisability inherent in case studies of this form (Plummer 2001: 153-4). The coding process also generated organisational nodes which indexed common biographical elements (e.g. first year exams, moving into off-campus accommodation, approaching the end of university) in a way which permitted analysis of continuities and discontinuities across the cases. Selected nodes were then exported from the database and filed alongside transcripts, with the intention that they would serve as a resource that could be consulted as the fieldwork progressed.

This coding process greatly influenced the second year of fieldwork, engendering a more nuanced conception of the underlying issue of personal change. It helped render the underlying question in much more specific terms: what

mechanisms tend to generate personal change and what mechanisms tend to generate personal stasis? In the context of the ongoing fieldwork, focusing upon this question soon posed a new one about the time horizons over which these mechanisms operate. What tied this together was the notion of concern as ‘what is urging us’ (Macarinni 2011, Porpora 2003) or, as it was operationalised, the ‘issues’ which recurrently occupied the internal conversations of participants. The main analytical focus during this second year of fieldwork was the identification of such ‘issues’ and beginning to trace out the mechanisms generative of them, in the process sharpening the distinction between the operative causes, the biographical event and their subjective reception.

After the fieldwork process had been concluded, the remaining interviews were transcribed and filed alongside the thematic nodes from the first phase of analysis. The digital audio files were then organised and reviewed independently from the transcripts (Tracy 2012). This was initially intended as a highly immersive process of review in which I would bracket out analytical questions in order to familiarise myself with the particularities of the case. In practice, this process quickly began to feel artificial and this ‘audio familiarisation’ became more of an ad hoc process, undertaken concurrently with the analysis of the transcripts. These were analysed on a case by case basis, using annotation software on a tablet computer to highlight and annotate the text, focusing upon ‘issues’, the conditions under which they had become so and factors shaping the construction of the issue and the response to it. The intention of this process was to delineate cycles of change for each case, without losing the ‘texture’ of the experience. While some have argued that longitudinal interviews resist assimilation into any one theoretical framework (McLeod 2003) the analytical process adopted here proved effective for elaborating

iteratively upon the analytical framework that was developed and refined through the empirical case study. The results of this analysis are presented cross-sectionally in the fifth chapter and presented as case studies in the sixth chapter. The analytical framework itself is presented in a finalised form in the seventh chapter. As a framework, rather than a method per se, it is not irrevocably tied to the methods or process detailed in this chapter. In fact some of the limitations of the interview method became clear during the analysis, as the importance of relations was recurrently illustrated by the data but the possibility of any first-hand encounter with these relations was foreclosed.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Given that data collection proceeded in a number of phases, so too did the process of obtaining informed consent. On every occasion that ICONI was distributed, it was stressed that this was a voluntary process. The initial e-mail approaching respondents who had indicated a willingness to participate included a further explanation of the project, as well as an indicated willingness to clarify or expand on any aspect. The first meeting was preceded by a further explanation of the project, as well as it being made clear that participation was optional, all data would be anonymised and that participants could have access to transcripts and audio files if they so desired<sup>67</sup>. This information was reiterated in each subsequent meeting to ensure informed consent was a sustained matter.

Longitudinal interviews serve to amplify the ethical issues inherent in

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<sup>67</sup> Only one participant expressed an interest in this and I sent the first year of audio files. I reiterated the offer towards the end of the fieldwork. The intention was to “demonstrate a willingness to share the perspective that the data allowed” (Thomson 2007: 579).

qualitative research. As Farrall (1996: 9) puts it, the greater ‘level of engagement between the interviewer and the respondent’ means that ‘the risk of disclosure of matters of a distinctly personal nature’ is also greater. This problem is particularly pronounced when the choice of a longitudinal approach is motivated by the desire to map individual cases in a level of detail beyond that facilitated by synchronic analysis. This issue was further intensified for the present project by the use of degree course as a sampling variable. The tension here exists between the representation of the case and the risk of rendering participants identifiable. As well as the use of pseudonyms and the removal of direct identifiers, biographical particulars were excluded unless necessary and replaced with non-specific alternatives. This focused on details such as names, countries, regions, cities, occupations etc.

One unexpected aspect was the degree to which ‘insight and the satisfaction of curiosity may exist in some tension with the invasion of privacy’ (Thomson 2007: 578). This tendency ensuing from the duration of longitudinal interviewing was intensified by the degree to which I shared an environment to varying extents with participants. It was often somewhat disconcerting to encounter participants out of context, with my desire to be friendly standing in conflict with a fear that I would inadvertently find myself slipping into an ethnographic frame of mind in the absence of informed consent. In these cases, boundaries came to feel fuzzier and more ambiguous than they had in my previous (non-longitudinal) experiences of qualitative interviewing. I had previously experienced encountering ex-interviewees from past projects but out of context encounters while sustaining an ongoing participant-researcher relationship poses mundane interpersonal questions which invite reflexivity about managing the boundaries of the relationship.

## **Chapter 5. Trajectories into Higher Education**

The following chapters present data from the longitudinal case study, the design of which was described in the previous chapter. The focus is literally psychobiographical, as opposed to concerning biographical narratives, examining the trajectories into and through university in order to understand the person each subject was at any particular point in time. This entails the necessity of looking backwards at life prior to university and this was a substantial focus of the initial interview.

At the point of university entry (eighteen or nineteen years) the concerns of students are likely to be fluid to varying degrees and often incomplete (Archer 2012: 114). Their nascent sense of what matters to them cannot provide guidelines for shaping a life but they do begin to filter the opportunities available, given that our concerns act as ‘sounding-boards, affecting our (internal) responses to anything we encounter, according to it resonating harmoniously or discordantly with what we care about most’ (Archer 2012: 22). These concerns are elaborated through a response to the necessity of selecting from the possible things to do and to be encountered within the natal context. Each of the students who took part in this research had, with one partial exception, left the family home and committed to a course of education which was three years or longer. In doing so they had already begun to select from the opportunities available to them. However the variation between subjects is much broader than the substantive content of this selection. In understanding the diverse range of ways in which this selection was made by participants in this study, we can begin to gain purchase upon the equally varied psychobiographical trajectories which led them to converge on the same institution.

## Choosing to go to University

All participants in the project were enrolled on university degrees and present in one of the four core lectures within which ICONI was distributed. However it is important to treat the notion of ‘choosing to go to university’ with care so as to avoid inferring a choice to go to university from their enrolment<sup>68</sup>. Instead, we can more usefully construe ‘choosing to go to university’ as an intensely variable biographical process which can produce divergent ‘outputs’ despite apparently convergent ‘inputs’ and vice versa. It is also necessary that, as discussed in the third chapter, we avoid an actualist reading of biographical transitions which simply invites subjects to narrativise the process. This is not to say that we should ignore narrative, far from it, only that our interest should be in the deliberation which that narrative retrospectively recounts to a greater or lesser degree, as well as in the constellation of constraints and enablements which are so often occluded by such narratives. It is imperative that we avoid taking stories of agency at face value while also recognising the deliberative action unavoidably involved, in a range of ways, in their coming to be attending the courses for which they were recruited.

Standing still is not a course of action open to those who in one sense or another have chosen to go to university. Even if they have acquiesced to enrolment without great enthusiasm ... they immediately had to engage in deliberative action: which university, what course, where it is situated

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<sup>68</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, the dual honours system constitutes a mundane consideration for avoiding the further assumption that presence in a ‘core lecture’ reliably entails the choice of a particular degree.



(Archer 2012: 126)

Making these choices involves selection from the variety of options available. Their nascent practice of reflexivity shapes what options are considered to be salient and how the task of choosing from these options is approached. This was most weakly manifested in the case of the communicative reflexives, in relation to whom a particular methodological complexity obtains and who were unfortunately sparsely represented amongst willing interviewees. Jess, discussed in great detail later in this chapter, made a choice which was largely predicated upon contingent opportunity. She was made an offer by the university which was much lower than she had anticipated given what she had recognised as its position in the league tables. John described a decision making process which was largely concerned with the new geographical context in which his life at university would play out,

My first idea was that I might live in London. Then I was like ‘yeah, let’s go to Manchester, that’s a nice place, big city’. Then I went ‘hmm maybe stay in the Midlands... Birmingham’. Then I was like... I went to Coventry and I really like Coventry... the university and the city. I’m one of the sad buggers who actually likes... I enjoy the surroundings, great lifestyle, great place. I know there’s a lot of deprivation but you’ve got to see through that shit. You’ve got to stop being snobby when you’re in Coventry. Because I know the place looks like it’s run down and it looks like something out of... it pretty much hasn’t changed since the 80s. I really like Coventry and the university. So I applied there. I said this to a couple of my school teachers and they were like ‘perhaps you should apply to Warwick?’ I was like

‘what’s this place?’ ‘Warwick, it’s the university nearby’. So I looked it up and I was like ‘ah right, it’s fourth best, not bad’

Sarah’s decision was orientated towards the nature of the campus environment and the lifestyle it would facilitate. She rejected the idea of attending a university in London, where she grew up and sought to return after university, because she wanted the ‘whole uni experience’ and didn’t want to live at home, which would have been necessary given the universities didn’t offer positions in halls of residence to those whose families lived in London. She wanted to ‘see a bit of the country’ before she lived in London ‘my whole life’. In contrast Naomi, registering as an autonomous reflexive, was heavily guided by league tables in her choice, opting for Cambridge initially and switching to Durham upon a rejection from the former because the latter had the ‘top spot’ for English Literature. In common with many of the meta-reflexives, discussed below, she had a passion for her discipline (her ‘first love’) but, in contrast to the meta-reflexives for whom such considerations were relatively marginal, this end was construed in terms of finding the best course at the best university. However these are claims about tendencies, and should be construed as such. For instance Nadia had initially gravitated towards studying art at university but described how ‘my parents brought me back down to earth saying “oh what will you be doing after that?”’. In such an instance, we can see the normative influence of parents meeting a receptiveness towards concerns of the kind advocated, in a way which will likely intensify the tendency towards practice of this mode.

The meta-reflexives amongst the participants were primarily oriented to the discipline entailed by their choice of degree course. For instance Tom, an 18 year old Physics student from south-east Asia, described how he had previously been drawn

to both maths and physics before ultimately committing to studying the latter at university.

I'm always quite confident in mathematics... mathematical expression is quite concise. It's compact. It's quite concrete and it's accurate. So if you write several symbols people get what you mean. Instead of if there's no mathematical symbols you write whole passages and I don't like writing things either. I might not express myself well in writing long piece of essay. So I like mathematics in the first case but I think it would be quite dull if I just deal with symbols. And physics is a subject which use the mathematical expression to understand nature and how everything works in nature. So I would think it would be more meaningful to use mathematics that way to understand the world

What Tom describes here can best be understood as a statement about the aesthetic value of mathematical symbolisation. However it is his own day-to-day life which has led him to value this value, as the perceived clarity and reliability of mathematical expression was brought into focus by his experiences of intellectual expression more broadly. This value served to filter his potential options, as variety became 'bounded variety' (Archer 2012), drawing him towards a choice which involved mathematics. The sophisticated account he offered of the interrelationship between mathematics and its cognate disciplines reflected his longstanding deliberations about the nature of these disciplines, with Tom describing how he saw physics as a 'trade-off between engineering and maths' such that 'physics underlies the principles you use in engineering' as a discipline in which you 'may just use the

principle that we end up with'. He saw a nesting of disciplines with physics as 'more basic than engineering and mathematics which in turn may be more basic than physics'. But he was drawn towards both abstraction and its practical deployment, with physics representing a deliberate compromise between these two competing impulses. More so, the grounding of physics in the 'real world' left it with an advantage given that, as he put it, 'to understand the real world is something that I love to do'. But the 'meaningful' nature of physics conferred by its secure placement in the 'real world' also had an aesthetic component, as the virtue of mathematical symbolisation found deployment in the capacity of physics to 'relate different things that seem to be distinct but they actually obey the same kind of law'. Tom described the satisfaction he took in problem solving and the practical negotiation of the fact that 'one principle can apply to different things' and the pleasure found in the 'neatness' of this.

The aesthetic dimension to a choice to study physics was not confined to Tom. This was articulately conveyed by another meta-reflexive within the group, in fact the strongest practitioner on both qualitative and quantitative measures. James, who had always had an 'interest in inventing languages', described how 'the speed of the communication' facilitated by symbolisation appealed to him. He explained how what was 'incredibly complicated really' could nonetheless be 'compressed down into something very simple' and how this meant that in physics 'an awful lot is being communicated at once'. To talk of self-selection along disciplinary lines does not necessitate substantive claims about 'personality types' or an equivalent notion to this effect<sup>69</sup>, instead it can be understood as a matter of biographical convergence.

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<sup>69</sup> Maruyama's (1980) account of 'mindscapes' offers a thought provoking approach to understanding the psychological dimension to disciplinary self-selection. Its explanatory use by Maruyama tends, as Archer (2012: 302) argues, towards psychological reductionism but

However rejecting the notion of ‘personality types’ does not necessitate we reject the idea that this convergence can be both cause and consequence of commonalities between those whose lives have unfolded in ways which leave them within a shared space. This is precisely what the morphogenetic analysis of personal change can help us understand, facilitating as it does an unpicking of the temporal sequencing of ‘cause’ and ‘consequence’ i.e. which shared characteristics explain the biographical convergence and which are explained by this?

It is also important to recognise how this convergence can be apprehended by the parties involved. James described the feelings provoked by finding himself in a situation where ‘you suddenly find everyone else is like you’. He points to the fact that ‘we all like the same television’ and ‘we all have cats’, with the underlying commonality being a recurrent theme throughout the multiple interviews, often with reference to his experiences engaging with those who weren’t ‘physics people’. However, though these commonalities might seem striking when reported, it is important to avoid reading back a shared meaning from a convergent practice (Archer 1985). So for instance, in contrast to the intellectual and aesthetic motivations of Tom and James, Paul’s reasons for choosing physics were fundamentally pragmatic:

well I’ve always wanted to do science cos I think, well science and maths were my best subjects throughout my life pretty much, I guess. I know I wanted to do some sort of science. I originally thought of doing chemistry or biochemistry and this was up until the beginning of A2 I guess, but basically

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there is no reason why such a notion of partly innate and partly learned ‘epistemological types’ could not be integrated into a developmental account of reflexivity and doing so would strengthen the cognitive micro-foundations of the internal conversational approach (Lizardo 2009).

I found out that it's a horrible jump between GCSE chemistry and A-level chemistry and I found it really really hard, I really didn't like it. So I thought do something I'm more comfortable with which was maths and physics, which turned out to be the best marks I got in my A-level so... that's why I chose it.

In this case, the practical concern for academic success, inculcated in part by the ethos of 'hard work' espoused by the father (seeking inter-generational social mobility) who was Paul's prime interlocutor on life decisions, left past experience of his own skills serving as a filter on future options. Though Paul was an impeded autonomous reflexive (Archer 2003: 298-341) this was a matter of lacking confidence in the conclusions he drew but his habitual mode of reaching this was distinctively autonomous reflexive<sup>70</sup>. In contrast to the meta-reflexive physicists, James and Tom, whose decision to choose Physics was value-driven, Paul's was ultimately pragmatic:

But I think even with physics, when I chose physics, it's not necessarily the thing you enjoy the most, it's actually what's best at the time. That's why I chose physics as a course. I think right now, later on I think I'd choose

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<sup>70</sup> In fact this lack of trust in his own conclusions seemed to stem in part from his sense of his father's judgements about his life as being superior to his own. However there were also biographical factors, as the contextual discontinuity he encountered at an early age as his family moved to the UK from a south-east Asian country also left him isolated at school, as part of a 'special learning programme' to improve his English which ultimately had its funding cut, while his family did not speak English at home. The contextual conditions for autonomous reflexivity were present but the relational preconditions for developing trust in his own judgements were not. Describing himself as having a 'low EQ' and with longstanding social angst, his first year of university involved a growing capacity to negotiate the social in a way which was subjectively satisfying, suggesting a potential move away from fracturing over time.

something that I enjoy because I think that determines the rest of my life more than my degree right now.

In the second year of the research, Paul was taking introductory business studies and being encouraged by his father to consider a career in finance. His early decision to choose a degree on an instrumental basis was already pointing towards the possible realisation of the intergenerational social mobility which his father had sought for Paul. While it was unclear whether he would continue to endorse these ends, which were undoubtedly conditioned by the norms endorsed and enforced by a father who had long preached the virtues of hard work and individual advancement, Paul had begun to pursue them deftly in a strikingly strategic manner.

While Holly was not a physicist, instead studying Law and Business, she was, unlike Paul, a displaced autonomous reflexive (Archer 2003: 319-33). She was also a single-parent, undertaking a degree while living with her mother and twin sister around an hour's drive away from the university. Her choice of degree was orientated towards the future, particularly her concern to make good career choices and provide for her son. She explained how she had a clear image for her life of finishing university, getting a job, buying 'a nice little house' so that she could support herself and her son, afterwards just enjoying a career. In this sense university was 'just a step on the way'. Her second choice had been to study Law and English at another university but, though this backup choice including English was a matter of personal interest, she evaluated Law and Business primarily in pragmatic terms, though the point should not be overstated since she did find Law intellectually interesting. Unlike Paul, whose showed a propensity towards autonomous reflexivity which had yet to manifest itself, Holly's biography was indicative of her having

already practiced this mode, until the birth of her son and the breakup of the relationship with her son's father served to displace her from it. After ten months at home with her son, she had formulated a project to go to university and decided that she should work to save up money prior to this. Whereas Paul struggled to be confident in his own conclusions, Holly's difficulty lay in enacting those she had already reached. Her displaced autonomous reflexivity was constituted through an autonomous mode of setting goals but also experiencing recurrent difficulties in enacting plans on a day-to-day level. She knew where she wanted to go but was struggling to negotiate the everyday challenges her circumstances presented to her getting there.

Stephen was the third fractured reflexive in the sample, electing to study psychology with an optional sociology module. Whereas Holly and Paul both had a marked propensity to autonomous reflexivity, though one impeded by countervailing biographical events, which manifested itself in their choice of degree, Stephen's displaced communicative reflexivity offered little to no directional guidance in this respect. He initially chose a joint sociology and psychology module (hence his attendance in the core sociology lecture). He had never studied either before but he 'didn't really like the subjects at school', hence precluding past experience as a guide to future choices, instead choosing psychology because it 'seemed interesting'.

He described a sense of psychology as providing transferable skills which would help 'no matter what job I do'. He sought to attend university as near to home as possible and described a return to his city of birth as his permanent place of residence in terms which cast it as an inevitability. His prime concern was sustaining his regular attendance at his football team's matches, valued as recreation but also as the basis for contextual continuity with his father, brother and friends. Being a fan,



which should be construed in active terms as a practice<sup>71</sup>, was constitutive of a taken for granted routine in his life founded on regular attendance at matches, broken only by the end of the football season. Prior to university, he ‘used to play football every single day’. He described how he had been presented with ‘a chance to play semi-professional football’ but had ‘decided to come here [to university] because I couldn’t do both’. The contract was a ‘pay as you play’ deal with the reserves of a lower division football team, which would have necessitated a ‘day job’. He recounted how in the end ‘my family decided that it’s best... I think it was best that I came here really’ because of the absence of any guarantees of future professional football. However when he came to university, he found himself making a transition from ‘football every day to no football’ and having tried out unsuccessfully for the university’s prime team, consigned this concern to a subordinate status which left his role as a supporter as his remaining prime concern.

Three obvious risks are presented by analysing a choice of degree in the manner presented above. The first is to infer such a motivation for all on the basis of an observed motivation for some. The second is to ascribe causal efficacy to the motivation purely on the basis that it existed<sup>72</sup>. The third is to reduce the decision

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<sup>71</sup> See Archer (2000: 214). The centrality of football in Stephen’s life, in the twin guises of spectating and playing, offer prima facie indicators of a propensity for autonomous reflexivity. The qualitative data offers no further support for this hypothesis, instead pointing towards his former practice of communicative reflexivity. However it should nonetheless be considered that a one-to-one correspondence between fracturing and a displaced or impeded mode should not be assumed. Much as, say, a practitioner of communicative reflexivity might later come to practice autonomous reflexivity, it seems possible that a fractured reflexive may, say, simultaneously have the potential to develop a communicative or autonomous mode if the propitious circumstances were to obtain in future.

<sup>72</sup> This was precisely the objection raised to the Giddensian notion of ‘fateful moments’ and the tendency it engenders to slide into an actualism which takes professions of agency at face value. The participants’ narration of their choice of university and degree is the starting point but actualism can be avoided by not treating this as the end point. Instead, these accounts of individual choice need to be modeled in terms of the relational networks within which the subject was embedded at the time of choosing, as well as their reciprocal interaction over the lifecourse.

making processes which led the individuals concerned to the university in question and to the degree they were registered on to an isolated moment of choosing a degree. What all these considerations have in common is the need they illustrate to avoid modelling decision making processes in a reductive or abstracted way. The former concern will be addressed through a brief discussion of other aspects of choosing as a biographical process. The latter concern will be addressed in the following section, in which the analysis will turn to the qualitative dimension of familial and peer relations in the natal context, as it is only through an analysis of their ‘variable but powerful’ causal influences that we can ensure the avoidance of a voluntaristic monadism when analysing individual biographies (Archer 2012: 97).

The meta-reflexive subjects were more inclined towards selecting their degrees as embodying disciplines, while the autonomous subjects were concerned with the future implications of this choice for their life projects. In contrast the communicative reflexives were primarily concerned with factors other than their degree or its implications, while the fractured reflexives lacked a sustained orientation towards these choices. This self-selection encountered qualitatively was also found quantitatively through the modes of reflexivity recorded when ICONI was distributed in the core first year lectures for each of the disciplines. The high proportional incidence of autonomous reflexivity in Business was consistent with the qualitative findings for the sole subject (Holly) from this lecture<sup>73</sup> whose (displaced) autonomous reflexivity found expression in choosing a degree which she believed would best improve her employment prospects and allow her to provide for her son.

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<sup>73</sup> While it was tempting to speculate that the varying rates of willful participation were patterned along disciplinary lines, there were nonetheless enough countervailing factors potentially impacting upon this to render such a claim tenuous at best.

Similar considerations could be invoked to explain the relative incidence of autonomous reflexivity amongst the physicists<sup>74</sup>, given the increasing reliance of finance on ‘quants’ (Tett 2009) as well as attractive prospects in a range of cognate sectors. Two of the three physicists who participated had considered pursuing graduate opportunities in finance. In the case of James, the strongest practitioner of meta-reflexivity in the sample, the appeal of finance, which he would consider ‘just for the money’, was entirely the removal of constraints it would facilitate upon his self-directed and value-driven projects. For Paul, a displaced autonomous reflexive, the consideration was more substantive, though clearly initiated by his father’s overt directiveness. Another interesting finding concerning the Physicists was the high preponderance of expressive reflexivity, with six individuals registering as such<sup>75</sup>, in contrast to a single individual in Business and none in Sociology or English Literature. Unfortunately the lack of expressive reflexives, that is those who have yet to develop a specific practice of reflexivity and instead rely on situational responses to novelty, amongst the interviewees precludes qualitative clarification of this quantitative finding. With one exception, who instead cited ‘work’, each of these six cited quintessentially communicative concerns (Archer 2007, 2012) as the thing they cared about most deeply: friends, friends and family, social interaction. Relational concerns also figured as the second or third ranked concern for all, with the only exceptions being ‘music’ (in two cases) and ‘work’. This could be read in terms of Archer’s (2012) account of the origins of fractured reflexivity, with expressive reflexivity representing the form of this which is not constituted through displacing from or impeding the development of another mode, in the relational poverty

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<sup>74</sup> Given the length at which two of the physicists described the attraction of symbolisation to them, it is difficult to avoid considering the relationship between reflexive inner dialogue (the concern of this study) and non-reflexive self-talk of which logical symbolisation is an extremely specific form (Archer 2007: 63)

<sup>75</sup> Scoring less than the mean of 4.00 on all modes of reflexivity.

unevenly propagated under conditions of late modernity. However proper investigation of this would require a research design particularly orientated towards the genesis of expressive reflexivity.

It is also notable that the rate of fracturing was lowest in physics, particularly when seen in light of the number of expressive reflexives registered. Again, without expressive participants amongst the physicists, any suggested explanations would be irrevocably speculative. Nonetheless, it invites questions about the possible relation between a discipline orientated towards fundamental mechanisms in the natural world and living one's life, as expressives will do, in a way oblivious to enduring mechanisms in the social world (Archer 2012: 277-91).

Another quantitative finding which eludes qualitative elucidation due to a lack of willing volunteers concerns the high incidence of meta-reflexivity amongst the English Literature students. One pertinent qualitative finding in this respect, concerning the tendency identified by Archer (2012: 207) for meta-reflexivity within the cohort to grow over time, is the propensity of the sociologists to reflexively appropriate insights from their degrees (for instance pertaining to class or gender) and apply them to their lived experience. A prior acquaintance with sociology at A-level could leave the discipline proving attractive on this level to those already having developed or coming to develop a meta-reflexive practice. Furthermore, it opens up the question of the varying extent to which different disciplines, as institutionally mediated through particular degree courses, provide 'raw materials' for the elaboration and clarification of personal concerns (Archer 2012: 247). A research design which administered ICONI to the same cohort in each of the four

degree courses<sup>76</sup> could shed light on disciplinary inflection in the retention and shedding of each the modes of reflexivity.

Figure 1: Modes of reflexivity amongst ICONI respondents

Percentages	Sociology	Business	English Lit	Physics
Communicative	16.67	14.52	15.79	13.04
Autonomous	28.43	37.1	21.05	40.58
Meta-Reflexive	21.57	25.81	39.48	21.74
Fractured	20.59	14.52	15.79	10.14
Other	12.75	8.06	7.89	14.49

The rate of meta-reflexivity recorded amongst sociology undergraduates (21.57%) was substantially lower than that found by Archer (2012) using the same instrument on the equivalent student population five years previously (38.6%). As Archer (2012: 318) suggests, this could *prima facie* be attributed to the broader social and economic context, given that this cohort entered university at a time of economic crisis with imminent upheaval in the higher education system (Holmwood 2011b, McGettigan 2013). The lower proportion of meta-reflexives may correspond to the higher proportion of fractured reflexives if ‘family relations have suffered through circumstances such as involuntary redundancy and mortgage difficulties’ and ‘young people are now more pessimistic about “making a difference”’. However the design of the present research cannot address Archer’s question as to whether these fractured reflexives are ‘rejectors’ (Archer 2012: 318). One of the two students registering quantitatively as a fractured reflexive was from this cohort but was

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<sup>76</sup> Though there would be obvious logistical difficulties in ensuring the continuity of the cohort, given the previously discussed complexity attached to dual honours degrees, as well as the selectivity which the institutional system actively demands of students as they move through their degrees.

qualitatively established to be an impeded communicative reflexive and not a 'rejector'. Furthermore, the additional students who were determined qualitatively as fractured reflexives registered as such on ICONI<sup>77</sup>.

As discussed in more detail in the previous chapter, the fundamentally micro-social focus of the present research cannot support generalisation to broader populations (Archer 2012: 292-4). One unfortunate consequence of this unavoidable limitation is that it curtails the possibility for analysis of classed and gendered aspects of the process of choosing a university and degree course (Clegg and David 2006). David et al. (2003) found a strongly gendered dimension to this choice, with females tending to approach this decision dialogically whereas males did so in a more autonomous fashion. The reasons cited for this were varied, such as not wanting parents to intrude on their lives at school, not progressing well academically or more broadly wanting to assert their autonomy in relation to their parents (David et al. 2003: 35). Their findings also lead them to assert a classed dimension to parental involvement, as 'the middle classes attempted to reproduce their own educational patterns whilst the working-class parents wanted to transform their children's educational fates' (David et al. 2003: 29). However we can accept these claims, as well as the 'parental strategies' assimilated to habitus by Atkinson (2010: 99), while still objecting that these accounts are predominantly and problematically externalist (Sayer 2011).

For instance Atkinson himself, in a polemically Bourdieusian account, asserts that the 'most fundamental' difference in the backgrounds of those who 'despite

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<sup>77</sup> This divergence could be ascribed to the fallibility of either the survey instrument or the qualitative judgement. Nonetheless the qualitative judgement is given explanatory priority because of its superior evidential grounding. An alternative explanation is the time lag engendered by the research design, with the initial interviews (upon which a qualitative assessment was primarily based) taking place in the second academic term, whereas the surveys were administered during the first term.

beginning life in the dominated sector of social space, ascended into a more privileged position through the course of their education trajectories’ was that ‘unlike the parents of the remainder of the dominated’ they ‘seemed to place a high value upon education success and encouraged it among their children’ (Atkinson 2010: 97-9). It is the evaluative orientation, invoked here then immediately dissolved into the operation of the *habitus*<sup>78</sup>, which needs to be understood from an internal perspective. Doing so further opens up the important question of how these messages vis-à-vis the importance of higher education are evaluated by the children themselves. The conceptual vocabulary deployed in the aforementioned accounts can, as Sayer (2011: 2) puts it, too easily ‘miss people’s first person evaluative relation to the world and the force of their evaluations’. The fact a parent regards it as ‘axiomatic’ that their child will attend university does not, in itself, entail the realisation of the assumed outcome. To understand how these influences operate necessitates that we explore the qualitative character of relations in the natal context in a way which avoids the externalist approach seen in accounts like Atkinson’s. In doing so, it becomes possible to better understand the influence of ‘background’ in a theoretico-empirical fashion (Archer 2012: 292) and, with this, we might begin to flesh out the putatively classed and gendered dimensions of these processes in ‘internalist’ terms. Contra Atkinson (2010: 105), we can acknowledge ‘the range of moves objectively offered to [subjects] by the resources they hold’ and resist a voluntaristic ‘discourse of choice and self-realization’ while nonetheless taking reflexivity seriously.

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<sup>78</sup> Such that the ‘limits of the conceivable range of possibilities’ as pertaining to occupational choice are ‘based, in the end, on the limits of capital inhering in their structural position’ (Atkinson 2010: 104).

## **The Influence of Family and School**

As already discussed, some degree of deliberation is unavoidably involved in the process of getting to university but the precise form this takes is intensely variable. Understanding this variability necessitates that we retrieve the relational characteristics of the subject's natal context as real and efficacious influences upon their developing reflexivity, as they begin to select from the variety they confront in their environment. From this perspective we can usefully understand the qualitative dimension of family relations in terms of the coherency or otherwise of the rules, guidelines and recommendations encountered within them. This can occur either explicitly in interaction with the child or implicitly through the observable modelling of particular norms and understandings, drawing upon the capacity for practical interpretation which is developed through interaction with caregivers (MacIntyre 1999: 14)<sup>79</sup>. The complexity arises because, contra Elder-Vass (2010), the endorsement and enforcement of norms are obviously variable. This has important implications for the characteristics of the normative environment which a child confronts because it entails the possibility of disjunctures and discontinuities between the norms expressly enforced, through parental injunctions etc., and those which a child comes to see, however inchoately, their caregivers as endorsing. Thus we can think of tension, or even outright contradiction, between the normative expression of individual caregivers, as well as that which exists between them. If normative differences exist within the family then a subject is presented with 'mixed messages' which introduce the necessity of selection within the home. These might

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<sup>79</sup> The reliability of these statements concerning parental normativity could certainly be questioned. However, as Archer (2013: 127) engagingly notes, the important point is that the individuals concerned 'perceived parental normativity in this non-consensual way'.



be divergent standards, orientated towards different segments of the lifeworld and perhaps reflecting parents with substantially different concerns. However ‘mixed messages’ may also be messages which do not mix and this has substantial ramifications because it precludes an experience of taken-for-granted normative sharing within the family, introducing the necessity of selection at a much younger age than would have been the case without such normative dissensus (Archer 2013b: 114). One further possibility is a significant lack of ‘messages’ within the family, such that parents act, either by design or accident, in a way which the subject experiences as non-directive.

The degree of socio-cultural integration within the family, manifesting in the consensuality (or lack thereof) which characterises the normative guidance and expectations the child encounters, has further relational characteristics. The endorsement and enforcement encountered by a child are tendencies manifesting in the interaction within the family unit. However, contra Crossley (2011), these interactions condition the relations between family members rather than constituting them. As such, we can analytically separate interaction tendencies and their emergent effects from the character of the relation itself, as relations are understood to have ‘irreducible properties arising from the reciprocal orientation of those involved’ and this reciprocity explains the reproduction or transformation of the relational bond existing between the parties (Archer 2010: 202-3). In recognising the relational goods and relational harms which are present within the family unit, for instance trust and its absence, we come to see individual selectivity as something embedded in a relational context and orientated towards the particular goods and harms carried within them. These relational characteristics constitute the objective environment in orientation to which the subject’s first evaluative responses begin to

emerge<sup>80</sup>. Archer (2012) conceptualised these responses over time in terms of four categories: identifiers, independents, disengaged and rejectors. The identifiers were all in receipt of high 'relational goods' and the value they placed upon them worked to minimise the necessity of selection by reducing the appeal of new opportunities. The independents lacked such 'relational goods' in their natal context with 'disruptive family dynamics' having 'induced an early independence amongst these subjects who recognised the need to take responsibility for themselves'. The disengaged had been in receipt of relational goods but in a form 'mitigated by parental tensions from which subjects withdrew' leading to a 'critical detachment from their parents and disassociation from the *modus vivendi* in which they had been reared'. The rejectors had encountered relational harm in the natal context and thus repudiated these relations but in a way which was non-purposeful, prioritising escape so that 'getting away was an end in itself' (Archer 2012: 100-101). Archer cautions that these categories are 'better regarded as clusters of subjects who bring a particular predisposition to the task of shaping their lives' as an emergent consequence of their evaluative engagement with their family background. However the data from the present project suggests that these categories can be further unpacked by considering the independently variable characteristics of relations with peers as well as those within the family.

To this end, we can usefully consider the case of Jess, registering quantitatively as a communicative reflexive on ICONI at the outset of the fieldwork but nonetheless exhibiting tendencies which would mark her qualitatively as a latent

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<sup>80</sup> Archer (2012: 124) issues an important warning against conceptualising this as an 'environmental background - like unchanging wallpaper - against which self-contained "individuals" engage in reflexive "decisionism"'. This is why a biographical approach is so necessary, as it's only with a temporal frame of reference that we can begin to understand the reciprocal causality at work in the interactions of a given individual with the relational network within which they are embedded. As persons change so too do their relations. The importance of this point is expanded upon in the penultimate chapter of the thesis.

meta-reflexive. Having lived in the same south-west town all her life prior to moving to university, she described her parents as ‘really good at bringing me up’. Her mother had long been a trusted interlocutor for Jess, with whom she would have ‘long conversations’ about things she’s ‘thinking about’ on a regular basis. In spite of the relational goods characterising her natal environment, she nonetheless sought to construct a new life for herself outside the bounds of this context, a prospect which engendered a range of emotional responses:

It just came over me that I was leaving everything that I knew. All my friends, my foundations, my job... I just felt like I was going to a totally new life. And I just kind of had a bit of a cry once. But apart from that it just kind of... I was excited about it I suppose and nervous and didn’t really know what to expect

Once she had moved to university, she initially lost herself in a whirlwind of activity as she adapted to the practical demands of her new life. But once the sheer weight of novelty had ceased to crowd out other concerns, she soon began to feel the absence of the warm and trusting relations which had been an everyday feature of her natal context,

First term that wasn’t very nice. I felt I had to do it alone. Like I felt that if I rang my parents or, you know, spoke to people at home then it would ruin the illusion of living alone and that kind of thing ... I think I felt I didn’t want to rely on a form of support that essentially wasn’t there. I mean, yes, I could talk to someone over the phone but their presence isn’t there ... There’s no hug there.

She continued to describe her loneliness during this first term, as she came to terms with the 'lack of love' in her immediate environment given that at this point she 'didn't really know anyone well enough to have that sort of emotional support there'. What needs to be explained is why Jess so clearly turned her back on the relational goods she enjoyed in a deliberate embrace of the situational logic of opportunity. She entered her first year of university with the intention 'to do as many things with as many different people as possible'. She embraced the social possibilities university life afforded with a deliberate intention to avoid having 'inhibitions about what you might be into or what people you can meet and that kind of thing', overriding preconceptions which might foreclose opportunities and refusing to allow past experience to inductively steer her away from present variety. Jess was conscious of not knowing what mattered to her and she was intent on finding out. Understanding why she entered university with this intention, willingly turning her back on the relational goods of her home life in the process, necessitates that we understand the characteristics of the networks of relationships which jointly constituted her natal context.

As already noted, Jess had described the long and meaningful conversations she would have with her mother about the things that were preoccupying her. She would offer advice in response but, as Jess put it, 'she'll say what she thinks but she'll be like "but it's your choice, it's your life, you do what you think's best"'. In the language of Elder-Vass (2010) she would recurrently endorse a view in relation to the issues which occupied Jess's internal conversation but she would make no effort to enforce it. Meanwhile her father, who had suffered 'a restricted childhood' where 'it was very much "children should be seen and not heard"', endorsed nothing

other than Jess's own right to choose. At the time of the first interview, she suggested that this parental non-directiveness was the reason for her embrace of the situational logic of opportunity:

I feel like I've been able to make my own judgements and, you know, experiences, rather than just her saying 'no, no, no that will upset you' ... I think that's why I try and do as many things as possible. Because I haven't been told about them.

Her natal context was characterised by the receipt of high relational goods but her parents, particularly her father, also valued the development of her own selectivity. The home environment was one which might otherwise have been conducive to identification and the emergence of communicative reflexivity, as Jess came to formulate her tentative projects within the bound of the natal context. But the non-directiveness of her father in this respect worked to leave the values she encountered, implicitly and explicitly, as options. This tendency was most pronounced when it came to religion. Jess was brought up a Christian and had attended church each week but, in the first interview, described how 'every week or so I kind of doubt the idea of God and that kind of thing'. Her parents accepted her decision to stop attending church during her time at secondary school and, it seems, their tolerance of this decision and understanding of the doubts which fuelled it avoided Jess being presented with a stark choice between theism and atheism. This non-enforcement of views which they nonetheless endorsed meant that Jess was able to decide that 'going to church wasn't a priority to my faith' and the potential that this non-attendance might become a focal point for rejection of parental normativity was

avoided<sup>81</sup>. In the absence of a parentally induced disjuncture between their faith or no faith, Jess's decision to no longer attend church went hand-in-hand with a gradual intensification of her own exploration of her doubts. As we shall see shortly, this introspective freedom concerning her faith set her upon a path of cultural exploration which engendered a growing propensity towards meta-reflexivity. Her family relations supported her exploration but, given the high receipt of relational goods, did not in themselves necessitate it. Parental tolerance of the elaboration of her own concerns, even when contrary to those which they had sought to instil in her, removed what would otherwise have been a morphostatic constraint upon her personal development but failed to provide the guidance which would equip her for the possibilities of what to do and who to be which this expanding horizon opened up. This deliberate non-directiveness, which was a pervasive feature of the parenting experienced by all meta-reflexives, served to undercut what would have otherwise been a propensity towards communicative reflexivity emergent from natal identification in a trusting and intimate familial micro-world. However it did not actively encourage the development of another mode. To understand Jess's trajectory into and through the university system, as well as the distinctively meta-reflexive practice of reflexivity which developing in the process, we must look to the specific characteristics of her peer relations and their implications for the relational dynamics of the family unit. Jess was in receipt of high relational goods and yet, contra Archer (2012: 126), she was voracious for new experiences. Understanding how this came to be so entails examining the intersection between familial and peer relations.

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<sup>81</sup> This situation is a useful illustration of how the relational dynamics of normativity are obscured if we elide the 'endorsement' and 'enforcement' of norms as Elder-Vass (2010, 2012) does.

Jess painted an idyllic picture of her early education in a Church of England primary school, describing her vivid memories of classical music in assembly and ascribing her 'sense of the old school red brick' values to the formality and traditions of the institution. However it was one which, with the arrival of a new head teacher, 'went downhill' and 'lost a load of funding, a load of students'. She then moved on to a 'typical sort of state school' where 'there were about 30% of the population that were not going to go anywhere academically'. Over time this left her feeling like an outsider, with the strong sense of 'educational values' she was coming to recognise herself as being moved by increasingly at odds with the dominant ethos of her peers at school. She began to 'hang out with the misfits at secondary school' and became part of a group who 'were all into wearing black and neon colours and dying our hair' and were all 'drama people'. In spite of the comfort gained from her association with this group, who collectively repudiated what they saw as the lack of academic interest which characterised their peer group, she wilfully left them behind with the transition to college. She recognised this as a sustained tendency in her life, leaving behind existing relationships when moving through institutions:

I seem to make a habit of not hanging out with the people I already know when I go to a different institution. At primary school there were a load of people in my tutor group but I didn't hang out with them, I just sort of made new friends. Then when I got to college I made new friends again. I seem to do this constant sort of moving ... It just seems to happen. Maybe I'm sort of concentrating my... the kind of people that suit me. Do you know what I mean?

She described a residual closeness with these friends from secondary school but added that she no longer spent time with them. At college she rapidly found a new group and, in contrast to her previous circle of friends which she had entered through a solidarity with one member founded on a mutually frustrated object of romantic attraction, this was one which made her feel 'like a valued member' and that she 'was actually in the group'. It is from this vantage point that Jess's self-observed tendency towards a 'constant sort of moving' in pursuit of the 'kind of people that suit me' begins to make sense, as her primary school experience of being 'the one that was picked on' gave way to solidarity with a group she nonetheless did not feel like a valued member of and in turn transitioned into deeply meaningful relationships at college. Her 'constant moving' constitutes the emergence of selectivity in relation to potential friends, with her accumulated experience moving her towards the project of elaborating a sense of the 'kind of people that suited her'. As she described her friends at college, 'it's just nice to be around people who have the same values as you I suppose'. However her sense of these values was still inchoate and, as she changed, so too did the objective commonalities on which she sought to ground her friendships.

Her impulse towards discerning what mattered to her led her away from her existent friendships and towards new ones. The claim here is not that this was a necessary or sufficient condition for Jess choosing the university and degree course she did. The point is rather to explain why she felt compelled to 'do it on our own' and why she made choices which led her away from her natal context and the friendships which had been formed within it. While she had tended towards a 'constant moving', in which a new friendship group was substituted for an old one, this was not in any sense a purely external process. The relational characteristics of



each group, in which she sought bonds grounded in commonalities of value and character, accentuated through their falling short of the need to better understand what mattered to her, which in turn necessitated the pursuit of greater knowledge about herself and about the social world. This growing selectivity, a propensity engendered by peer relations, acted back upon her family relations. Most obviously in the sense that it led her away to university and prompted her earlier discussed insistence upon 'doing it alone'. Towards the end of her first year, she described how her confidence that she 'was on the same wavelength' as her brother had begun to falter, being replaced by an increasing sense that 'he is a different person and that I need to make more of an effort to get to know him again'. An element of exchange had come to characterise her interactions with her parents on her visits home, which she described as 'more like a lodging arrangement' in which she greatly extended the range of chores she did around the house relative to those she did when permanently living there. While the trust she shared with her mother was sustained, Jess had begun to recognise an asymmetric aspect to the relation and her own changes had begun to act back upon the relation,

Even living with people you feel that if you talk for too long then they're gonna get bored and you should listen to them and whatever, whereas my mum's always very... she just listens. I ask her about her day and her life and whatever but she doesn't really have anything to say. She never says anything ... I think the way she sees it is that her identity is wife and mother. And her role as mother is to listen and to nurture her children and so that's kind of her life now. She goes to work and that seems to be it really. It seems

odd. You kind of get to the age where you realise that you want to find out about your mother's life.

While her relation with her mother seemed to be in the early stages of shifting, as the evaluative criteria Jess brought to the relationship were themselves changing, her relation with her father was deepening as a consequence of her own developing reflexivity. She described her father as someone clearly prone to intensive deliberations, with a tendency to clash (ascribed to their similarity) gradually being overshadowed by a solidarity rooted in the externalisation of internal thought.

In the same setting but outside the family, she began to see the relations within her circles of 'home' peers differently, describing her surprise at how 'the people you'd never think would hang out with each other are suddenly going out together' as a result of the absences of those who 'moved away to university and works and things'. While still identifying with her 'hometown', she nonetheless felt 'not a part of that' anymore when encountering the networks of peer relations she was previously centrally ensconced within. The topographical reference points were still shared, as evidenced by the 'feeling of nostalgia' Jess described in not being 'a local here anymore' yet knowing 'where this shop is and you know... that sort of thing', but they no longer formed a shared context for everyday life. She also recognised the disjunctive concerns of her former peers, describing how 'they're kind of talking about mortgages and stuff' while she was still in her second year of university.

Towards the end of her first year, she described how she felt like an 'outsider' in her halls because she would go out in the evenings much more than her other hall mates. While a 'very close' group formed around the shared space of the

halls, Jess pursued her own interests and sought, as she had at college, to surround herself with people who 'have the same values'. She was due to move into a shared house in a quiet area of Coventry in her second year. This was to be shared with four friends who were 'all nice quiet people' and who she was 'quite close to'. When describing her accommodation plans for her second year, she contrasted this to halls where one could 'get quite lonely' in a 'long corridor' where 'everyone's in and out and in and you don't know where anyone is'. In contrast, she found herself looking forward to sharing a relatively small space with a select group of close friends who were 'quite tidy' and who had 'the same values about that kind of thing'. Much like herself, these people were not 'going out clubbing people' and, in sharp contrast to her experience within halls of residence, it seemed a disjuncture between her lifestyle and those with whom she shared her home was likely to be replaced by, at the very least, a compatibility if not a reinforcing complementarity.

Prior to moving into the house, she has expected that norms concerning guests and other matters would be deliberately negotiated. Instead, she was surprised to find a *laissez faire* orientation rooted in a reciprocal trust in the reasonableness of the others. As the year progressed, an individualised but welcome *modus vivendi* began to develop within the house, such that Jess described how 'we're all just kind of quiet people that come home and sit in our rooms', which was reproduced into her third year of university. She also began to settle in the context of the city, as opposed to the relatively isolated university campus on its periphery. She contrasted the city positively to her natal context, describing how 'reading the local newspaper, it feels more of a community than the newspaper is' and observing how in her former town 'people don't care ... they just kind of serve you, they wouldn't even look at you or smile or do anything, whereas in Coventry they're really helpful'. As her second

year progressed, she described how her life has become 'more structured' in contrast to the previous year which had been 'all sorts of hectic ... just doing things when and when you had to and what time you had and that kind of thing'. Increasingly tracts of her life became routinised, with 'work during the day and do a bit of work in the evening if you haven't been able to', in contrast to 'doing more random things all over the place'. While her first year had been dominated by 'going to different things and trying out different things', her second year had become more stable, with Jess describing how 'I know what I'm doing, I've got the clubs I go to'. An embrace of variety, in which she was 'quite happy to sort of flit around, different groups, different places' was beginning to 'settle down' as work 'kicked in'. Whereas she had previously lacked 'a regular sleep pattern or eat pattern' because 'you don't have anything that's regular, even society socials are all over the place and you've got different work going then' she now increasingly had a stability and predictability to her day-to-day life.

It was against this background that her newfound commitment to church attendance emerged. She had 'met a lot of Christians at uni and they just say "come to my church, come to my church"' but she had been extremely conscious of the 'clashes' between them and found herself recurrently attending different churches, recognising that 'having a faith is easier if you do it with other people' but confronting the dilemma of selection which this recognition entailed. She described it as a response to the unpredictability of her lifestyle, as she was 'searching for something secure' and going to Church every Sunday represented 'something that would always be on at the same time, the same place, the same thing'. In this sense, it represented a project expressive of the introspective concerns which had occupied her since she had ceased to attend church with her family in her natal context, with

Jess describing her realisation that ‘actually I could spend the rest of my life thinking theoretically and theologically and spiritually about everything but it’s not really going to do anything for me’ and ‘it’s just better to go out and do something’. As well as being a response to this uncertainty, it was also constitutive of her emerging *modus vivendi*, as the commitment constituted an architectonic principle in terms of which the other aspects of her life took on a new valance.

Well I went to a Christian festival with my friends and just kind of, like, I went the year before and they were saying, you know, get into a church, meet people who are the same, because it’s hard to do alone. And I didn’t really follow that, I just went to the festival and then came back and then it was just kind of there at the back of my mind again, whereas this time I thought well I do need to join a church because there are so many different viewpoints that you can have at university that you just kind of need to have one, in a sense, so I’ve started going to churches now a lot.

This decision immediately truncated the necessity of selection, as the broader existential questions entailed by her religious deliberations came to be replaced by exploratory questions about the right church to attend. The nascent commitment entailed a focusing of her selectivity rather than its diminishment, as she described ‘going around different ones’ in the pursuit of the one which was right for her. There was a vocational aspect to this but one which has mediated through the kinds of relations she sought and the goods emergent from them:

One of the reasons for joining a church is to have an impact on, like a good impact on society, you know, you get support with things like whatever you do, charity work, or just helping people ... it's hard to do alone, and so joining a church for a long period of time I guess helps that. And you get to know the people there, and I think having a faith is easier if you do it with other people.

This went hand-in-hand with a turn away from the theological issues which had so frequently occupied her internal conversations. In a parallel to her sense of it being imperative to simply make a choice from the diversity of viewpoints available to her in her present circumstances, she had drawn the conclusion that her theological ruminations were not serving any purpose for her and that 'it's just better to go out and do something'. As the research period came to a close, it seemed that Jess had found a life in which she was surrounded by the 'kind of people that suited her'; something which was only possible because of her embrace of the situational logic of opportunity in order both to discern what mattered to her and to better understand the kinds of people in the social world who would fit or fail to fit in the kind of life she was beginning to craft for herself. This emerging *modus vivendi* could not be taken for granted, not least of all because of the impending end of her degree with all the logistical imperatives this entailed for the task of shaping a life. But this was undoubtedly the task to which she now turned, as variety had become 'bounded variety', for reasons emerging from the interaction between herself, her friends and her family, first within her natal context and then within her life at university.

## **Relational Reflexivity and Personal Morphogenesis**

Much of the discussion so far has concerned the selection from variety, as mediated by familial and peer relations within the natal context. The case study presented was intended to elucidate the biographical ramifications of the (qualitative) characteristics of these relations. However the significance of the categories introduced by Archer (identifiers, independents, disengaged and rejectors) lies in the role which these distinctive patterns of evaluative responses to natal relations plays in developing and maintaining the modes of reflexivity introduced in the first section of the thesis. These modes in turn constitute divergent vectors of selectivity, negotiating the necessity of selection in distinctively different ways<sup>82</sup>: '[R]eplication for the communicative reflexives, instrumental rationality for the autonomous reflexives and value-commitment for meta-reflexives' (Archer 2012: 271). This is not a matter of final selection but rather the emergence of a path-dependent trajectory of selectivity, with the elaboration of an evaluative orientation and the ensuing reduction of variety to 'bounded variety'. It is the diachronic engagement with the world rather than any synchronic evaluation which is of interest here, but it is only through understanding how a subject evaluates their environment at particular points in time that we can gain traction on the elaboration of their concrete singularity over time.

This reduction of variety to 'bounded variety' could be seen in Jess's case with her decision to commit to church attendance truncating her existential questions into more practical ones pertaining to which church to attend. Her case further served to foreground the independent variability of familial and peer relations, such that relations of the former sort which would otherwise engender one orientation can, given a distinctive set of the latter, precipitate another one entirely. Nonetheless, the

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<sup>82</sup> In this sense fractured reflexivity constitutes an inability to negotiate the necessity of selection.

broader point still stands and the following chapter seeks to elaborate upon it, using an exemplar of each of the four modes (communicative reflexive, autonomous reflexive, meta-reflexive and fractured reflexive) as case studies through which to examine the psychobiographical trajectories from a relational standpoint. In each case, one or more morphogenetic sequences will be delineated to explain the processes of personal change underlying their trajectory into and through their first two years at university.

While the primary focus will be on individual cases, much stress will be placed on the features of the structural and cultural environment which constituted a (partially) shared context for all participants<sup>83</sup>. The point here will be to illustrate how, much as with relations themselves, these contextual features serve to constrain and enable, often in entirely mundane ways, the kinds of things it is possible to be and to do for those within them. Features such as the university terms, features of accommodation contracts, and the spatiality of the campus environment relative to the local towns and cities can all act as conditioning influences upon projects being considered and as active constraints and enablements upon those which a student is seeking to enact. The point is not to analyse the campus environment in and of itself, such as to identify putative influences which could be assumed to obtain in the lives of students qua students. It would be a mistake to assume that the sorts of factors suggested here apply across the student body: some flexibility in accommodation contracts is possible (particularly after the common move to private accommodation in the second year), some students stay in the local area outside of term time (particularly if they have investments in the local area outside of their university life)

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<sup>83</sup> The institutional features of the university which render reflexivity imperative should not however be construed as an unchanging background. Changes in higher education, at particular institutions and throughout the system as a whole (Clegg and David 2006: 155-7), modulate the conditioning influences upon those making their way through the system.



and some do not have a family or do not wish to commit to the one they have. But whereas these conditions did not obtain, as was true of all participants apart from Holly who lived with her family in a nearby town, it generated a need to live divided between two contexts which continued at least until the end of their degree. This was particularly pronounced for the foreign students, especially those such as Caroline whose 'other' context was on the other side of the world. The necessity of international travel sharpened the experiential disjuncture involved in moving from one context to another. In such a way the following chapter will seek to ground its analysis of personal morphogenesis in the institutional features of each individual's environment and better conceptualise how these structural factors are encountered at the micro level.

## **Chapter 6. Case Studies**

The previous chapter provided context for the lives of the students who participated in the study, analysing the results of the survey research through which the interviewees were recruited and using an illustrative case study to draw out the empirical and conceptual issues encountered in an attempt to understand how any student comes to be enrolled at university. In doing so, it was argued that understanding the relational characteristics of their natal context is of prime importance, particularly relations with family, relations with peers and the relations between these relations. The present chapter will use this discussion as grounds upon which to explicate the relational dynamics introduced in the previous chapter. It will use four case studies, one for each dominant mode of reflexivity, in order to identify and unpack the processes through which these subjects changed as they moved from the natal context into a life at university.

### **Communicative Reflexivity**

Avuncular and outspoken, John's social presence belied his years and he appeared somewhat older than other participants in the research. He was born in a south-eastern European country but moved to the UK with his family when he was two years old, from which point onwards they lived in the same council flat in a London suburb until he moved to Coventry to attend University. His family were political exiles, stressing the value of education to John from an early age, which he perceived as marking them out in the community. He described himself in terms of his country of origin but actively disidentified from the associated community,

repudiating what he described as the ‘hedonistic, very single-mindedly patriotic’ tendency within it and the aspirational materialism which he saw as contrary to the value of education. Growing up within a political household, he had been involved in campaigning politics prior to going to university. His natal context was characterised by a marked stability, something which he attributed to his father’s concern to provide a ‘very stable lifestyle’ for the family. This contextual continuity was anchored in the geo-local context, embodied in the boundaries of the ‘council estate in very middle class surroundings’ with his primary and secondary school both near to the family home. Nonetheless, progression through the school system led to this beginning to give way to a class-bound experience of contextual discontinuity,

At first all my friends were quite working class. As I went up the education ladder... the biggest difference happened when I went to sixth form. No no first of all when I went to secondary school, I was... ‘what the hell’s this? Why do I wear a tie? What’s German? Bookcases I’ve never seen them!’ But then when I went to sixth form, all my mates left. My mates who went from the estate, there were about 20 or 30 of them. All of them just left and went to work. So I was like ‘shit, this is a big change’. And there weren’t many [people from his country of origin] either.

This contextual continuity grounded in the shared experiences of growing up on the estate and attending the same school together, after initially diminishing through the transition into secondary school began to be torn asunder through a rapid divergence of educational and occupational trajectories. The lifeworlds of himself and his friends from the estate began to dramatically part ways, with their leaving school to

begin work while John moved to a college he perceived as aggressively middle-class with a 'big pressure to conform'. These discontinuities intensified with the transition to university, as the similarity and familiarity which largely characterised his relations within his natal context, at least within the figurative and geographical boundaries of the estate, increasingly gave rise to what he recognised as deep differences between himself and those around him, regularly encountered through social situations for which his past experience provided little to no guidelines for present interaction,

'coming to university you become so class conscious ... There is a big gulf of difference between us. It's not... well it is detrimental to an extent. You can go up to a person and, say, have a chat with them. But their proxy viewpoint won't be that. Unless you have something like... erm... I've never worn a black tie, I've never done rowing, I've never done Rugby, I've never done Fencing. So when they start speaking like this... I've never done skiing either... so when it comes to speaking like this I'll be like 'what the hell are you on about? There's nothing in common'.

He described how he hadn't 'found' the kind of people who 'want to go for a pint' and who 'probably have a background like me'. The closest he felt he had come to meeting such people were some of the third year students, encountered through student politics, for whom their much greater workload presented an additional social obstacle in spite of their seeming commonality. Halfway through his first year he described a sense that 'I suppose that's the way you have to, you know, bourgeois yourself... you've got to start sipping cocktails to get by really'. While his university

relations were wrought with a recognition of the differences between himself and his peers, his presence at university was intensifying the experiential disjuncture which had already begun to open up between himself and his home friends prior to moving to university:

Even now when I go for a pint with them, they still talk about football but I don't really like football. I do follow it and now I follow it more than I ever have before but still there's a gap ... They're still my mates. I'm not going to leave them... not that I'm leaving them behind. They're going somewhere, I'm going somewhere. They're making more money than I will probably. They'll probably be more affluent than I will be.

So the contextual continuity which had long characterised his natal context was increasingly being replaced by an incongruity both at home and at university. This left the value he had placed on similarity and familiarity, warm relations with those with whom he had something in common, in tension with his capacity to craft a new life outside of his natal context. This movement into a new context had undermined what little basis remained for commonalities in his natal context while, at least as yet, providing no grounds for establishing new commonalities at university. Nonetheless, he began to see university as 'narrow' but wider than the social environment of his sixth form, though in the former there were 'still a lot of people who I can relate to' in contrast to their marked absence in the latter. He described how his sustained relations with his home friends were increasingly strained through actual social encounters, as 'it would be great for the first 10,15 minutes then it'd be like "so...." it was literally like time reset itself and you just feel like you've just

finished sixth form and you're amongst the same mates ... the same old conversations'. From his new vantage point, longstanding features of his natal context became more negatively pronounced, with John bemoaning the fact that 'people's approaches were very narrow minded' and that conversations 'weren't very serious'. He was increasingly aware of the struggle which some of his longstanding friends had to relate to him in turn:

They'd be like 'Oh so you go to uni then? What do you study', 'sociology', 'ok cool. Erm... labour's been doing bad'. If that's the only thing you can identify with me that's really shit. [...] Like you'll be standing there, for example, you're at the bar, you're discussing with a mate, you're like 'oh yeah so I read this thing in sociology'... believe it or not I did read it. Actually no I was reading Gang Leader For a Day. [...] I was trying to explain to my mate. I was like 'yeah there's this man who goes to one of the projects in Chicago', explaining it and someone will just shit all over it by saying something stupid. You'll just be like 'ah man I'm paying three grand for an education and there's a dick head like this, who's working full time, earning more than me but will just crap all over the conversation' Just be like 'oh really you're so intelligent'. Fuck off.

So the similarity and familiarity which had been such a formative feature of his natal context was being substituted for a dissimilarity and what would tend, with the intervening factors of time and subjective dissatisfaction, towards a growing unfamiliarity. With time he came to reassess these friendship networks, describing how 'I hung about with a lot of people because of the circumstances' and

increasingly distinguished between such situationally bound ‘home friends’ and those few he could ‘ring up and have a chat with’. This was contemporaneous with the intensification of quotidian demands entailed by moving out of the family home, described by John as a need to ‘adjust’ because of much ‘more preparatory stuff’ being necessitated in day-to-day life. He attributed his capacity to plan in this way to a self-discipline acquired from his experience in the army cadet force (‘a lot of stuff I learnt through cadets I could apply to other parts of my life’). He saw this as necessary for making the most out of university life, seeing his circumstances as materially unchallenging but requiring a sustained focus in order to avoid being an ‘absolute slob’. As he put it, ‘there are certain things which perhaps you don’t have to do up until you’re at university’. In this sense, the relational grounds for communicative reflexivity were rapidly eroded at the same time as his new social environment was rapidly inculcating a propensity for planning and preparation, a latent capacity which he attributed to his experiences in the cadets, far beyond anything that had previously been necessary in his life. Even so, deliberative engagement was predominantly situational, largely encompassing ‘rough plans’ and ‘reference points’ arising from immediate need. While the demand for such deliberation had increased, the need for it was still construed in terms of organic adaption to situational contingency, with John describing how ‘you don’t prepare for it, you just live’ because ‘nothing dramatic happens’ beyond the possibility of unpredictable catastrophes such as ‘the building falling down’ so ‘when change does occur you adapt to it naturally’<sup>84</sup>. At this stage, he still understood the transition to the new environment in terms of unfamiliar surroundings becoming familiar, entailing the establishment of new routines; certainly ones which required more

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<sup>84</sup> See Archer (2007: 273-5) for a discussion of this ‘everyday pragmatism’ so typical of communicative reflexivity.

individual responsibility, in the absence of his family and the school or college environment, but nonetheless the novelty he now faced was still experienced nearly entirely by him as a spur to routine. However, even as he successfully negotiated the new deliberative pressures posed by the novelty he encountered, he increasingly saw himself as insulated from further challenges by its insularity:

I don't think you learn budgeting in halls because you switch a light on... you leave that light on and it doesn't cost a penny. I know if I were to leave a light on, which lots of people do, they've got to pay for it... also when you've got heating on you get a bomb of a bill. So in that sense I'll learn [laughs] and I think it will... also when I start the next year, in a house, I'll be far more strict with budgeting.

This shifting sense of futurity, in which a closed context is encountered in a shared present<sup>85</sup> comes to be eroded by a sense of an impending trajectory of change within the context<sup>86</sup>, meant the new routines John was at this stage orientated towards were nonetheless being consolidated against a background awareness of impending change. Things had changed in his life and they were going to continue to change. This sense of the artificiality of the campus went hand-in-hand with an experience of

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<sup>85</sup> Though the 'sharing' of this present entails a reliance upon 'thought and talk' which, as discussed, was increasingly foreclosed for John.

<sup>86</sup> This is an important institutional feature of the social environment which must be considered biographically, as the role of 'student' within a particular institution is internally differentiated in terms of a trajectory constituting the transition through the institution, with rules governing the movement from being a 'first year' to a 'second year' and so forth, entailing inter alia the successful circumnavigation of assessment procedures and choice between curricular options. In this sense the institutional role will tend to engender a particular time horizon for its incumbent, though how the impact of the former affects the life of the latter is dependent upon how it is received and responded to by the subject. It is important that this influence not be construed deterministically however. See Clegg (2010) for an insightful discussion of time horizons and its relation to broader changes within higher education.



difference from those he encountered which was a dominant theme in early interviews. He described a significant number of his flatmates in halls of residence as living a 'very artificial, pretentious lifestyle' and described how 'theirs is like a wonderful cuckoo land...' "oh yeah, well we can get high every day and this and that". This sense of difference extended to his degree cohort, contrasting a small group of his friends with similar views and a strong interest in ideas to a predominant tendency to 'live the "university experience"... they go out and get pissed' amongst those whose 'mummy and daddy had been to university so that was the only logical way'. In this way, his individual relation to institutional novelty, for instance the requirements of his degree course and the responsibilities entailed by his residence, worked to intensify his sense of the dissimilarity between himself and his peers by accentuating the biographical differences underpinning their dissimilar responses to the shared environment.

The longstanding friendships which had been founded on commonality came to seem shallow and dissatisfying, with the underlying basis of similarity and familiarity being progressively eroded given that 'they're going somewhere, I'm going somewhere', while his immediate social environment presented little possibility for establishing new friendships on this basis. However over time, partly as a product of the varied range of situations into which he was thrown by his involvement in political activism and the student union, new friendships began to emerge, often through chance encounters:

As time went by, I got involved with societies, just lingering around being idiots... going into different groups and you meet people who are on the same wavelength as you. Or just hang around here you meet people who... for

example I got to know one of the guys on my corridor, who I'm not living with next year, we ended up having the same ideas. I was like 'what have you been doing the rest of your year?' We were both in different spheres yet we had the same ideas. I've found my ground. You know? I've got my grounding here at Warwick. [...] Like sitting on the Piazza, we had a shisha and a couple of cans. We're just sitting there and people come over. You know them roughly but you get to know them more.

The situationally grounded commonalities underlying his relations with home friends, emerging in most cases from 'hanging around together' because of the 'circumstances', began to find some reflection in the new friendships he was forming. These were friendships emerging from 'hanging around together' but the divergent nature of the circumstances, emerging from interest-driven pursuits in a context characterised by a great deal of cultural variety<sup>87</sup>, meant that the balance of commonality and difference which obtained between John and those he met was radically different. In contrast to the geo-local continuity of the school and estate, in which 'hanging around together' because of the 'circumstances' inevitably meant a significant degree of similarity and familiarity, those he met through happenstance as a result of interest-driven elective activities were often very dissimilar to him. For instance he described the process of becoming friends with a 'toff' who was 'pretty much the opposite' of him, recounting how 'suppressing the frustration' initially felt as a result of their contrasting politics meant that 'I appreciate what things we do have in common, rather than the major things we don't have in common'. Such a friendship is not founded on commonality, at least in the way that had predominantly

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<sup>87</sup> One particularly pertinent feature of the campus environment was the vibrancy of student societies, with 200+ active societies offering all manner of things to do and people to meet.

been his experience and that he had sought up to and into university. However, nor is it founded on shared values, at least in any straightforward sense, in the manner which meta-reflexives tend to seek (Archer 2012: 293). John valued the relational goods which emerged with people who were ‘on the same wavelength’, specifically those he could talk to at length and who lacked the individualism and narrowness which he perceived in others. But his elaboration of what it was to share such an understanding went hand-in-hand with an accentuation of the differences which obtained where it was absent. As is so often the case, he made his accommodation decisions for the second year of university early in the first which left him sharing a house with people from his halls, whose lifestyles (not least of all smoking and drug use), self-interestedness and cultural affectations he had come to find grating. He described a vague estrangement from the household, with his participation constituting a ‘puny’ social existence within the house, as his busy schedule of extra-curricular activities keeping him (wilfully) absent from what was increasingly a tightly bound social group being constituted within it. This deliberate strategy, in which ‘I keep myself to myself in the house’, reflected an emerging orientation towards his life in which ‘I like my life busy, it’s shit if it’s quiet... but when I get home it should be quiet ... I don’t like to mix the busyness into the house, it doesn’t work’. This constituted, under his own descriptions, a form of distancing from the relations structured around the house, with John explaining his view that ‘if you spend too much time in a household and if you don’t have ground rules, you’ll know people too much’ and ‘you’ll argue over nitty gritty things’. This distancing from his household, such that the other residents firmly became a ‘they’ rather than a ‘we’ of which John was part, came at the same time as he increasingly found himself cast in

a leadership role in his political work:

It's just very weird, like, I've never really seen myself to have much of a... like if you ask my mother how I am at home, she'll be like 'he's a very quiet boy, he keeps himself to himself'. You just end up having people come to you like 'John you're the man I can come to for help' and you're like <makes happy noise> 'I think my ego just got a bit bigger there'. I feel quite bad, I'm a modest man, I can't do that kind of stuff. It's very weird, erm, this is definitely new territory because people are... see me as this thing.

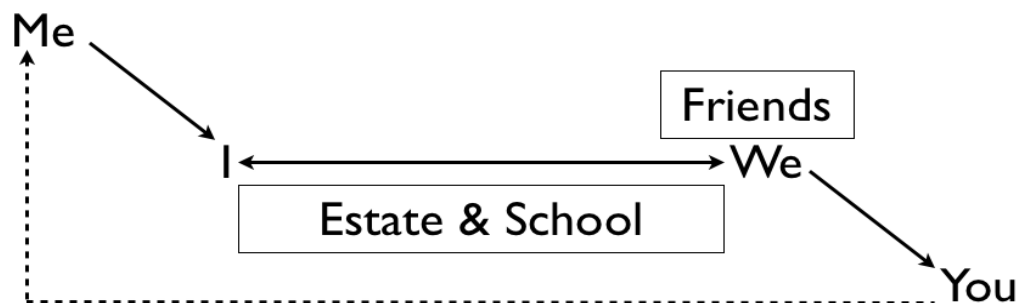
This was taking place at the same time as he, as well as the peers in his cohort, were adapting to the move into off-campus accommodation. The shift from life on the centralised campus, with the continual tendency it engendered for happenstance encounters, to a dispersal across two local towns was one which was significant in the day-to-day lives of all participants in the research, further intensifying (in an entirely mundane way) the reflexive imperative for John, already engendered by the changing nature of his friendships, the institutional demands of his education, the responsibilities he found himself assuming in his activism and the household he sought to distance himself from<sup>88</sup>. By this point he had lost contact with all but one of his friends from the estate with whom he had attended school, though 'even then there's nothing really to talk about'. We should see the dissipation of these relational bonds in terms of the broader changes in the life of John since the years at secondary school in which they were formed. At this time, his relations were orientated around

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<sup>88</sup> This latter point in the sense that this 'distancing' involved the deliberate circumnavigation of emerging routines within the household, as well as managing his relations with housemates to ensure cordiality but preclude closeness.

the reinforcing milieux of estate and school, with similarity and familiarity engendered by each in turn strengthening the other, as interaction flowed from one to the other within a relatively narrow geographical area. Under such circumstances, the 'me' (T1) conditioning how 'I' (T2) interact with a 'we' (T3) I stand in prior relation to tends to reproduce a future 'you' (T4) with the same characteristics as the initially conditioning 'me'. The point is not to imply a homogeneity of the 'I' and 'we', for instance John explained how he always felt 'a bit different to' his friends from the estate 'because I did my work', rather it is to claim that the differences were not subjectively salient. The reinforcing milieux of the estate and the school were generative of a shared present, replete with common reference points and experiences<sup>89</sup>, which served to render these differences irrelevant in contrast to the commonalities in play.

Figure 1

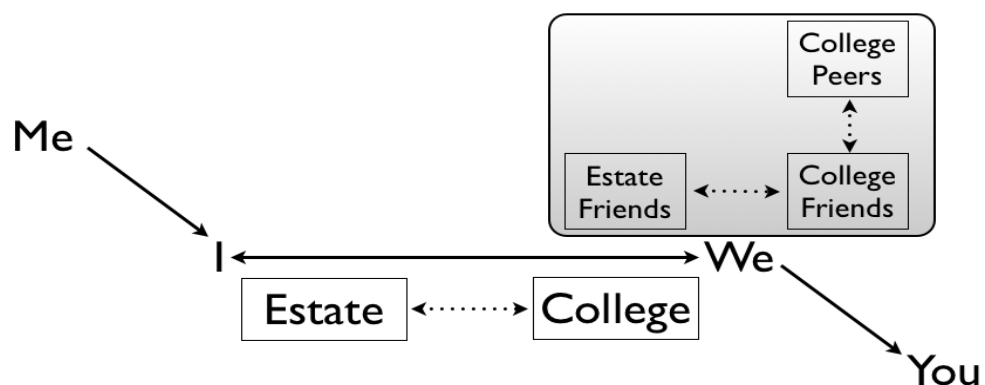


However, upon starting college the basis for this commonality was undermined, with the reinforcing milieux of estate and school being substituted by the conflicting milieux of the estate and college. We can assume the existence of a parallel process

<sup>89</sup> As a particular assortment of the factors suggested by Archer: 'common acquaintances, history and biography, unchanging geography, familiarity with the same schools, hospitals churches, factories, employers, pubs, buildings, and a common fund of anecdotes, idioms and local knowledge' (Archer 2007: 84).

for his friends from the estate, as at this stage ‘all of them just left and went to work’ leaving their various workplaces as an equivalent to college for John. In these settings, their respective experiences began to diverge, as entry to the world of work (for the friends) and college (for John) necessitated an encounter with variety beyond the estate: new challenges and new opportunities, new ideas and new people, new things to do and new things to be. Obviously, in all cases there were a multitude of factors constraining the embrace of this variety, as well as ‘bounding’ it by rendering certain options salient and others not. The important distinction is the newfound absence of the reinforcing milieu of estate and school which limited the potential role that the ‘we’ could play in bounding the variety encountered by any particular I<sup>90</sup>. His relations with friends from the estate were unavoidably beginning to change, not least of all because the friends themselves would be changing, just as entry to college brought new educational challenges alongside a cultural environment which he found challenging and oppressive.

Figure 2

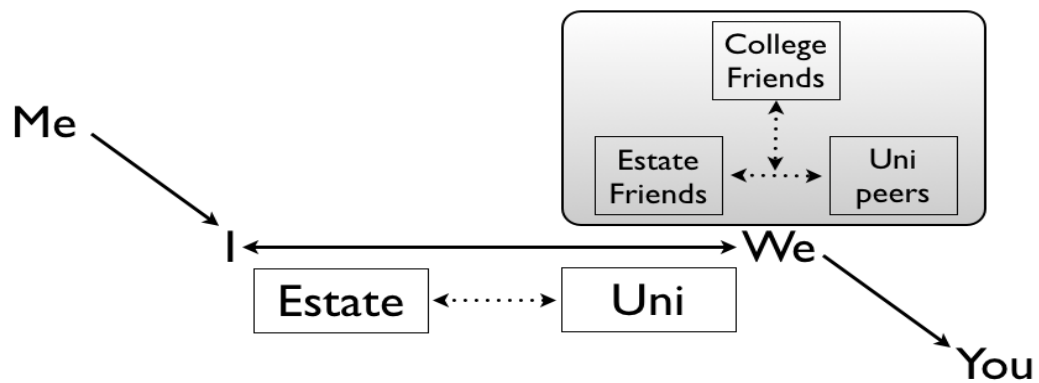


While John still knew people, with some friends from secondary school continuing

<sup>90</sup> The biographical constitution of reference groups, beyond the empirical remit of this paper given the methods adopted, will nonetheless be addressed theoretically in the following chapter.

into sixth form, the entire group from the estate were absent from college. He now lacked 'that closer link which I would have to my other mates' but nonetheless began to form a group 'in reaction to' those within the sixth form who were 'very haughty'. What commonality existed here was grounded on a 'difference in attitudes' between these friends and what they perceived to be the prevailing culture within the sixth form. This increasing differentiation of the 'we' in orientation to which John lived his life went hand-in-hand with the cultural influence of sociology, which he began to study at A-level, offering him a new language to make sense of the developing differences between himself and his friends from the estate, with him describing the sudden realisation that the thesis of *Learning to Labour* was 'literally, word for word' what happened with these friends, as the (non-salient) difference between their educational engagement and his own at high school came to manifest itself in what looked likely to be radically different biographical trajectories, as 'they're going somewhere, I'm going somewhere'. Though he still was not sure precisely where this 'somewhere' was, it was increasingly clear that it would be a destination determined in some way by his increasingly elaborated educational and political concerns.

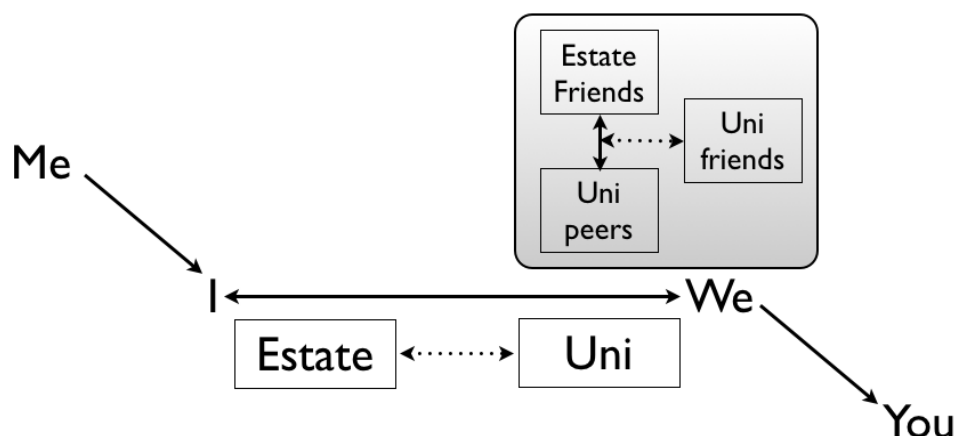
Figure 3



Upon entering university, the life worlds of John and his friends from the estate diverged yet further, though this was less true of those friends from college who were themselves going to university in various places around the country. In this new context, the class-bound differences encountered in his college were found once more amidst his peer group at university, with different ‘backgrounds’ linked in his mind to different ‘mentalities’ and lifestyles reflecting divergent values. What changed over the course of the research period was his capacity to find friends who transcended this gap, in which a ‘we’ was encountered through equally disjunctive poles of his hedonistic middle-class student co-residents and his increasingly distant friends from the estate who had now left education over two years previously. However, as he pursued the diverse interests which had emerged during secondary school and college, he increasingly established friendships founded on an experiential commonality more abstract than that he shared with his friends from the estate, in fact coming to re-evaluate the latter as having been a function of contingently happening to share the same space.

Figure 4





In morphogenetic terms Figure 1 represents a distinct morphostatic cycle, concluding when secondary school finished for John and his friends from the estate. However Figures 2, 3 and 4 represent an incomplete morphogenetic cycle, with distinct diagrams being used to convey the T2-T3 interaction between the ‘I’ and the ‘We’ which had yet to reach a conclusive T4 but nonetheless suggested a likely direction of travel, with John moving from the shared house with his ‘extrovert’ housemates who had been with him since first year, instead moving to a house with people ‘who are quiet quiet’ who are ‘very similar to me’. Furthermore, his dwindling contact with friends from the estate, now amounting to dissatisfying and irregular contact with a single friend, increasingly spelled the end of these friends as any part of his life. The relational goods enjoyed with his friends from the estate were increasingly recreated, albeit in a somewhat different form, with his newfound university friends with whom he was at ease and who were ‘on the same wavelength’. He looked likely to sustain a practice of communicative reflexivity, at least until the end of university<sup>91</sup>, albeit one grounded in a truncated sense of commonality which had to be reflexively worked at through learning to suspend his own tendency to rush to

<sup>91</sup> The disruption entailed by which meant the relational conditions for interlocution could not be guaranteed.

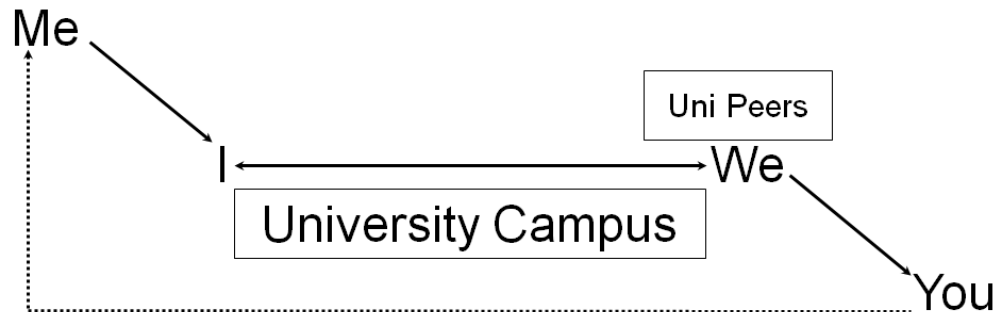
judgement, and in spite of the countervailing pressures (institutional, relational and cultural) which had rendered reflexivity increasingly imperative since he began university and might otherwise have led him to shift towards an autonomous or meta-reflexive practice of reflexivity.

### **Autonomous Reflexivity**

Naomi was a literature student who had been born in a southern city in the UK, living the first eight years of her life in the same locality, a short walking distance from her school and surrounded by extended family. The family had then moved to a south-eastern Asian country, the place of her father's birth, when he took a job and she was enrolled in an international school. The nature of the school, with many of the children there frequently moving on because of parents having expatriate contacts, meant that her circle of friends would constantly change. The school had a mix of over fifty nationalities, though the majority were British, offering an education which stood in stark contrast to the conservatism she observed elsewhere in the country. There was a conservatism of a different form within the family, with conservative values endorsed through explanation and reason-giving rather than injunctions and prohibitions. She ascribed the closeness and consensuality which characterised her family life to cultural factors, explaining how 'because Asians are often a lot more family based than the western... western culture's more individualistic so I have my individualism but I'm still part of a larger unit'.

However she had always expected to move back to the UK for university, particularly given what her family perceived as deficiencies within the local higher education system. The process of leaving her family was intensely difficult, prompting her to distance herself from them temporally as a ‘really bad type of self-defence’. Her first few weeks at university were a struggle, as she found herself isolated in a new situation, unsure of ‘what to do, or how to introduce myself, anything like that’. Thrown back upon her own resources, she initially withdrew, restricting her presence in the shared social space of the flat to the minimum necessary. This left her orientated towards the distant ‘we’ of her family and the potential ‘we’ of her university peers.

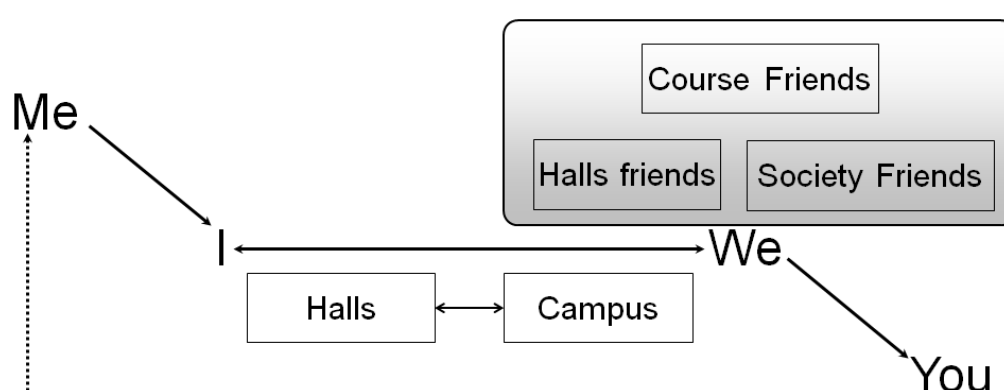
Figure 5



Eventually realising that ‘I didn’t want to spend the next three years in my room’ she forced herself to begin participating, deciding that ‘I’d better go out and start putting myself forward’. She soon found friends within the flat, in spite of most of her flatmates being enrolled in a different subject. Whereas the flat above was ‘quite loud’, she found her own to be an atmosphere conducive to work, in which people were considerate of the needs of others. As a non-drinker, accepting of alcohol but disapproving of binge drinking, this considerateness served to contribute

to the avoidance of tensions which might otherwise have served to undermine the emergent harmony within the flat. Communal cooking and eating played a significant role in generating the harmonious atmosphere within the flat, with Naomi enjoying cooking for people and enjoying the extent to which ‘food gives people a lot in common’.

Figure 6



At the time of the first interview, she described herself as having three groups of friends: her hall mates, her course mates and her friends from a student society. The relations with the first group were grounded in the domesticity of the flat, those with the second group through shared interests within a broader cohort she found ‘cliquey’ and the third group through shared participation in a performance event. Though she had participated in a number of student societies in her first term, these had been cast off by the time of the first interview and all her attention had been turned towards the upcoming performance. This society was a cultural group for those from the country where Naomi had spent much of her adolescence. She

described how she had joined the society to ‘just sort of say “yay, I lived there for a while”’ but then won the main part after her audition, soon finding herself taking part in daily rehearsals with a group of people to whom she rapidly become very close. In spite of her enthusiasm for taking part, she explained how she was aware of the ‘definite cultural differences’ and she felt she had ‘a foot in both worlds’ and did not fully identify either with this nationality or as British. As the daily rehearsals went on, with the performance itself being imminent at the time of the first interview, she conveyed how ‘they’re pretty much becoming my closest friends because I’ve just interacted so much with them over the past couple of weeks’. Given limited time and energy, as well as the responsibilities entailed by her degree, some degree of selection would always have been unavoidable in a situation in which she found herself moving between three largely distinct groups of friends. Understanding the role that the daily interaction, rehearsing together as part of a shared project reflecting a shared commitment, played in bringing this group so close together helps avoid the tendency to construe reflexivity in terms of detached decision making. Her commitment to this group of friends arose through the shared activity because this activity served to constitute the group; it is the relational goods emergent from their common project that were found to be valuable and, in turn, valued, as opposed to an abstract conception of the group itself<sup>92</sup>.

Once the event had passed, the lack of daily rehearsals did not impede the continued solidification of the group. During the Easter holiday she returned to the country to visit her family at the same time as many of her friends from the society did the same. They arranged to meet while there and went on a road trip around the

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<sup>92</sup> Claiming this in Naomi’s case does not imply a denial that this might have been true for others. There is nothing implausible about others being committed to an idea of the group (perhaps grounded in a valorised national identity) instead of, or as well as, the relational goods generated by this shared endeavour.

country, an activity in stark contrast to the dichotomous sense of two different contexts (one defined by friends, the other by family) which she had confronted earlier in the year. As well as literally bridging the gap between these contexts, the solidarity and belonging she found with her friends eased the transition between them, with Naomi describing how she 'definitely felt less sad coming back' this time. She now had a relational life at university that she valued and this made the process of leaving her family to return much less painful than it had been previously. One important addition to this life was her boyfriend, who had also been involved in the dramatic production. At the time of the second interview, they had been together for two months and though she was cautious given this was her first relationship, she felt it was contributing to a much broader change in her as a person. She had asked her parents before they started seeing each other and he had spoken to them as part of this process:

He had to ask my parents before I dated him. That's the way my family works ... they just talked to him and were like 'ok he seems alright, you can date him if you want' ... it's a bit unfair on him but it's the way my family works. I wouldn't be able to keep such a big thing a secret from them. I can't even keep small things secret from them to be honest.

This parental approval precluded the possibility of a conflict in which she would have been forced to choose between accepting the normative judgements of her parents and pursuing the potential relationship with her now boyfriend. What might otherwise have been a potential fragmentation within her relational network instead continued a tendency towards solidification, as the relationship was endorsed by her

parents and began from a genuine acceptance that it ought to be predicated on this endorsement. As Naomi began to look towards her second year, she described herself as having ‘found my niche really’ and ascribed many of the changes she had noticed in her personality to this congruence within her circumstances. Whereas once she had ‘really disliked change’, she now found that was becoming more ‘confident’ and less ‘neurotic’. The process of ‘loosening up’ she had felt herself undergoing ever since she had first began to venture out of her room in halls and introduce herself to people continued throughout her first year:

I think my perspectives on life have definitely broadened ... Partly because of my course and partly because of the whole new experience of university. They always say that university changes your life and I thought that was a bit of a cliché but now I kind of believe it. It's just been really enjoyable in all senses of the word. I've opened up socially. I meet who I've never had the chance to meet before. And I've learnt things that I never even dreamed off ... I've tried new things. I've gone on, normally I don't go on trips with anyone but my family but we've started going out as friends. Just short trips to say Oxford or something. Seeing places, discussing new things. I've met people... have introduced me to new types of food, music, cultures. Things like that.

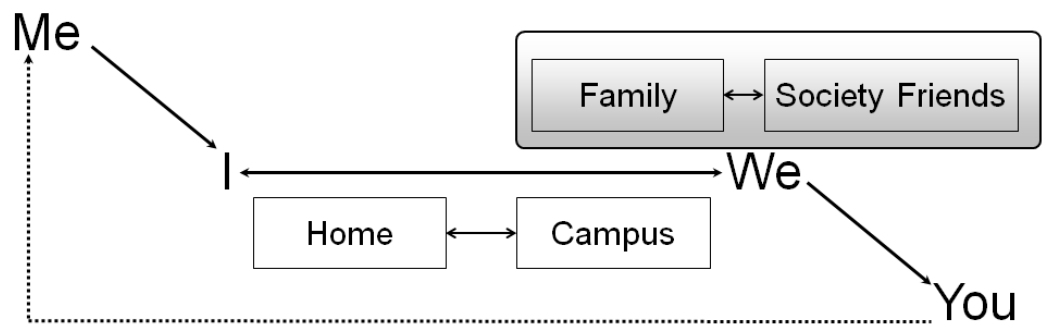
Within this encounter with variety, these new things to know and do, inheres the possibility of it provoking a transvaluation of existing values. Her family life had been consensual, resting on the reliability with which she ‘saw the sense in’ ‘everything my parents wanted me to do, or ask me not to do’. In the first interview,

she joked that ‘I’ve not yet gone through a teenage rebellion... I’m waiting for it come’. But underlying this humour was the real possibility that her new circumstances, with the new challenges they faced here with and the changes this provoked in her, could lead her towards a ‘teenage rebellion’: breaking with parental normativity.

During her first year, she Skyped with her parents and her brother a few times a week but, in spite of the connectivity afforded by this technology, it still represented a severe truncation of the possibilities for dialogue. The possibilities to draw upon them as interlocutors diminished at the same time as circumstances were independently disposing her towards a reliance upon her own resources. From the beginning of the first year, she was extremely organised; readily making lists and carefully budgeting to the extent that the practical exigencies entailed by her new life did not pose problems in any durable sense. But her investment in this strict routine was coupled with anxieties resulting from any deviation from it, something which only began to subside towards the end of her first year as the relationship with her boyfriend progressed. The relationship went hand-in-hand with her growing embeddedness within a dense network of social ties, in which a group centred around the cultural society was distributed across two adjacent houses a short distance from campus. This proximity facilitated a continuation of routine from the first year to the second year, precluding a need for the adjustment process and travelling entailed by most students moving off campus.

Figure 7





This apparent diminution of contextual horizons, which concerned her both in terms of the shared nationality of the household and its position effectively within the boundaries of the campus, nonetheless seemed to serve as a stable basis for further individuation. The house ‘feels more like a home, as opposed to some student places’ and the relations within it were harmonious and cooperative, with Naomi describing how ‘we all understand what we want from each other’ and a cleaning rota decided at the start of the year proving an effective *modus vivendi* for managing the everyday mundanities ensuing from sharing a home together. But there was also a balance of commonality and difference within the house, with the housemates having ‘similar interests in certain areas’ but being ‘different enough that we can, sort of, find out new things and learn from each other as well’. At the same time as these dynamics were playing themselves out within the household, her mother and brother had moved back to the UK, returning to the city in which Naomi had been born. This left them a couple of hours away after a year of being on the other side of the world. Her father’s work commitments meant he had to stay for the foreseeable future but he planned to join them as soon as it was feasible.

Yet the increasing density of her relational network, with the return of her family complimenting her continued relationship with her boyfriend, did not entail a

commitment to her context as such. Towards the end of the research period, she was applying to spend a year abroad, explaining how ‘because I know I’m coming back after a year it wouldn’t be that hard and hopefully I’ll have people visit me out there and I might come back at one point or something like that’. After all, as she observed, ‘with modern technology you don’t ever really – you’re not that far away’. What Naomi’s trajectory illustrates is how normative conventionalism and a concern for consensus are not exclusively the characteristic of communicative reflexives. She affirmed her parents’ values and sought to replicate many features of her natal context, explaining how ‘I’d definitely use whatever my parents have done as a model for my own children in the future’. But she was also willing to leave her immediate family in south-east Asia when she moved to university in the UK and, in spite of the fact that ‘leaving my family behind is one of the hardest things I ever did’, she was planning to do this once more, also leaving her boyfriend behind this time. At the start of the third interview, she had described how ‘I’m quite a competitive person so I always want to push and see what I can do’, the truth of which could be seen in the sometimes exhausting schedule of extracurricular activities she committed to, as well as in the globetrotting which it seemed likely would be a continual feature of her life. What remained to be seen was whether the peripatetic pattern of life she seemed to be inclining towards would one day begin to erode the concern for consensualism which grounded her relations.

## **Meta -Reflexivity**

One significant component of the first round of interviews was an open-ended discussion of the first year of university thus far. All the interviews were conducted

during the second term, with participants having been recruited through use of the ICONI survey in the first term, though scattered throughout that time period as a result of all manner of contingencies. To say it was ‘open-ended’ does not mean it was necessarily extensive. In some cases, the ensuing discussion was short and functional. Whereas in others, particularly those who had manifestly deliberated at length about what they wanted their new life at university to be like on a day-to-day level and the goods they hoped to encounter within it, these conversations became quite extensive and animated. Mary, a sociology student registering as meta-reflexive at time of entry, clearly fell into this latter category. Understanding why this is so necessitates, as with so many other aspects of the lives of first year students, appreciating the relational characteristics of her environment prior to university. Mary came from a close-knit family in the south of England, though her parents retained a strong sense of northern identity that was bound up in their own socio-economic mobility. They had moved to a leafy suburb of this city before she had been born and, though she had lived there all her life prior to university, she actively dissociated herself from a local identity and the ‘mentality’ she saw as being attached to it.

She described a micro-continuity at the level of family relations, which were ‘extremely close’, actively sustained in familial relations where ‘we talk to each other about absolutely anything and we don’t hide anything from each other’. However the intensity with which this continuity could be reproduced at the level of family practices contrasted with the incongruity which rapidly began to characterise her life as a whole from secondary school onwards. She describes some of her ‘happiest memories’ as coming from primarily school where ‘there wasn’t all that sort of cliqueness that happens when you go to secondary school... because you’re

kids you like everybody'. But the extensive group of friends she found herself embedded within fragmented at the point of entry to secondary school and this came to be an enduring feature of her school experience, further inclining her towards valuing the value which characterised her family relations. Mary's experience of sixth form college was one she looked back upon with regret, as both aspects of her character and social contingencies conspired to produce circumstances which restricted her social life in ways that made her feel she was 'missing out':

Well there was just four of us. Which was me, the girl who's my god mother's daughter and she had a boyfriend and one of my other friends had a boyfriend. So they were always with their boyfriends. So when it came to 'should we go out?', 'oh we can't, we've got to see our boyfriends'. So I think I was restricted there. So I didn't go out so much. So I think I missed out on a lot. So now I've come to university and I'd just like to experience going out and more socialising. I've realised that I've missed quite a lot from the past two years. There's so many more things I could have done if I'd had people who were willing to come with me.

An overriding concern for variety ('I wish I'd made a few more friends and not stuck myself to just those three other people') underwrote her orientation towards her social life during the first year of university. She had already made one friend via social networking prior to starting her degree who, fortuitously, happened to be placed within the same hall of residence. Nonetheless Mary appreciated that 'we've met other people along the way' and that the fact they did not have seminars together meant she was encouraged to make other friends. While she lacks the selectivity

which is characteristic of meta-reflexivity, she does so in a quintessentially meta-reflexive way. The drive to make up for what had been ‘missed out on’, with self and circumstances having imposed restrictions upon her in a way she was able to apprehend but not undo, led her to approach her new life in a relatively unselective way, embracing the opportunities for friendship presented by co-residence in spite of the initial anxieties which were intensified by the university accommodation service having failed to accede to her initial preferences. Understanding the difficulties she then faced in this sphere of her life, during her first year and into the second, helps us further understand the challenges which friendship can pose for meta-reflexives (Archer 2012: 222-35)

Her initially harmonious flat was becoming acrimonious at the time of the first interview in the second term of her first year. Every member of her all female flat had applied to live in mixed gender accommodation and so their placement together was a contingency arising entirely from the university having rejected their stated preference. Tensions were beginning to emerge as, with time, the conviviality which arose from their novel circumstances was giving way to an understanding of each other’s characters and, in some cases, judgements of them: interpersonal novelty was becoming durable relationality. The relative isolation of the campus environment intensified the inevitable conflicts arising over issues such as noise and cleaning within the flat, leaving Mary embedded within a proximate relationality that could at times be distressing,

I get very claustrophobic. Especially at weekends. Because obviously in the week you go to seminars, lectures and I’ve got some other activities that I do. So you’re getting out of the house... out of the flat. But when it’s the

weekend and you're just shut inside I drive myself mad. And I have to get out.

In spite of the sociable orientation towards flatmates which she deliberately worked at, Mary nonetheless stood apart from them in some respects. Her fastidiousness about cleaning and tidying within the flat, always washing up immediately after eating, left the disputes about shared areas as something external to her. Much of her flat shopped together at the local supermarket but she always went separately, allowing her to escape from the normative pressures within an 'exercise-orientated and dieting' group prone to reciprocal censoring and critique of each other's shopping and eating habits. As someone who doesn't 'do that sort of thing' and hasn't 'even set foot in the gym here' it was understandably unwelcome to feel her flatmates judging what she was buying. In spite of the predominantly friendly relations that obtained with the flat, the university accommodation office had inadvertently created something of a hothouse as a sequence of individuals who had electively pursued mixed sex accommodation found themselves unexpectedly placed within a single sex flat.

This sensitivity to the normativity bound up in the flat's relationality could also be seen in the difficulty which politics posed for her within a relational matrix the well-being of which she was committed to preserving. Early in the first<sup>93</sup> interview, she described her frustrations at the political views she encountered on her course:

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<sup>93</sup> The seemingly widespread tendency to do this being an interesting example of the intersection of the systemic and social, with institutional constraints arising from the timetable imposed by the university's accommodation service being amplified by social fears of 'missing out'.

There's been a lot of talk around different races and ethnicities. And I've been brought up by my mum and dad to be very accepting of other people ... I've been taught to be accepting of other races. But then when I go to my seminar, people are talking a lot about terrorism. People making such stupid statements about Muslims being terrorists.

These were paralleled by similar views she encountered from one of the girls in her flat. She was well aware of the bind she found herself in as someone who was 'not the most confident at putting my view forwards' but also have 'quite strong views' taken on board from parents with strongly left-wing politics. On a number of occasions she described the anxieties which conflict provoked in her:

I try and avoid confrontation. I don't like that feeling of somebody not talking to you. You know when somebody's not talking to you and you just feel really awkward? I don't like that. So if somebody says something to me I just stay quiet ... I get really worried about things. I'll still be worrying about it. I don't like that feeling that you've upset somebody or they're unhappy with you. So I just avoid any situations where that might happen.

Her concern for the well-being of the relationality within which she is embedded, any threat to which is experienced as an 'issue' leading to intense and disorientating deliberative preoccupation, conflicts with the concern for a substantively political notion of tolerance which finds itself challenged by the views of flatmates, course mates and others. Her response is the situational subordination of the latter through a strategy of avoidance rather than airing differences with all the risks that might pose

for the relations concerned. Nonetheless she finds these interaction situations recurring, along with a growing surprise at the prevalence of these intolerant views which illustrates her prior expectation as to the kinds of people she would find within the university environment,

I don't like the way that some people don't understand... that sounds really bad... but they don't accept other people. And although I would have thought coming to university you'd meet a lot of people who weren't like that, they are still.

Furthermore, a choice not to air the disagreement does not make it go away and these underlying grievances come to recurrently occupy her internal conversations.

For instance she describes how 'if it's somebody that's annoying me then I'd just let it pass but I'd have the conversation in my room or something' which is 'like having the conversation but not actually having to go through the repercussion of it'. This parallels the worries which are attached to the social order for her and the social quietism she practices in relation to them,

I wouldn't ask. But then I would mull it over and be like 'oh why didn't they invite me?' Then it would probably end up being something really simple and if I'd asked then I would have known. I've had a few things like that, where I've taken the situation wrongly and it's actually been something else ... it spirals until I found out the reason. Or something if it's something that's happened with a stranger, I'll never know, so I'll forget about it over the years.



Actively embracing this relationality in the manner in which she strove to as she entered university, given the sense of having ‘missed out’ in college, leads to an intensification of her internal conversation. Lacking the continuity which would enable ‘thought and talk’ while exhibiting only a bounded instrumentality, able to be deployed in relation to CV building and career planning but experienced as inapplicable to social life, she finds herself continually preoccupied by relations and her own properties and powers in relation to them: anxious about the disputes which her strong value commitments might provoke and perpetually wary of the possibility of saying the ‘wrong thing’:

I think it’s with the girls especially. Like they’re so complex... well not that men aren’t complex. But girls especially, you don’t know what they’re thinking. You don’t want to say the wrong thing to them and all things like that

The intensity of the deliberation necessary to successfully negotiate this relationality is compounded by its spatial concentration in her halls of residence. It’s hardly surprising that she frequently feels the need to ‘escape’ from the ‘claustrophobic’ environment. These experiences left her worried about her second year accommodation, for which she would be living with the majority of members of her first year flat on the far side of a nearby town 40 minutes bus journey away from the university campus:

Even though everyone in my flat keeps going 'it'll be better because we'll have more space to ourselves' I think there will be less space. Because we'll all be in that one house together and it's so close. And I mean I don't know how I'm going to escape to if I want to get away from people. So that's... I'm a little nervous about that.

The move into off campus accommodation did indeed prove distressing, even provoking thoughts of dropping out at one stage or moving back to on-campus accommodation (until the option was foreclosed by pragmatic consideration of the financial ramifications). Having returned from a foreign holiday with her family only a few days before the start of term, the transition from 'all that spending time with your family' to 'spending no time with them was a bit of a culture shock'. She found herself walking the streets of the town and talking to her mum in the park because of a desire to avoid revealing how difficult she found this experience to her housemates. She was concerned that the housemates would think her unhappiness was a reflection of her feelings about living with them, whereas it was in reality just her 'missing home'. She was reluctant to share her concerns, potentially being misunderstood in the process, only to become the centre of attention in a way she tries to avoid:

I think it's because I don't really like putting my problems on anyone else really. I don't mind doing it with my mum cos I like her advice on things. But I wouldn't want my friends to know I was upset because I wouldn't want them to fuss around me and be like... you know, like that? It's just I don't really like it. I prefer helping other people than people helping me.

This attitude of preferring to be the giver rather than receiver of emotional support is common to other meta-reflexives (Archer 2012: 229) resting, perhaps, on the possible misunderstanding and ensuing consequences which are confronted whenever meta-reflexives attempt 'translation' from their particularly personalised internal frame of reference. It is, as it were, more trouble than it's worth: without a 'fusion of the horizons' emotional support amounts to 'fussing' and helps neither to ameliorate distress nor address the practical question of what is to be done. However, as Mary explains, this orientation towards others poses problems when support is needed and habitual modes of relating to significant others have been established asymmetrically:

And what made it worse was that I rang my friend up, my friend who's at [university], because I wanted to speak to someone who wasn't in the context and she just said to me 'oh you'll get over that' and then she told me all about her problems. And I was like 'for once in my life I just wanted somebody to talk to' and she didn't speak to me. I felt really let down.

What she had sought was for someone to listen in a solidaristic fashion rather than 'advice' (for which she would have turned to her mum) or the 'fussing' and potential misunderstandings that would have ensued from sharing her distress with her housemates. This is precisely what she had offered to her friend on innumerable occasions over many years and, on this rare instance where she needed the relationship to be symmetrical, it was found to be profoundly lacking. This was later compounded by a rather dramatic instance of being excluded by this friend, leaving

Mary describing how she ‘felt a bit unrecognised for all the help I’ve given her’. She had helped this friend through chronic personal difficulties over many years and the realisation that she was, at best, taken for granted prompted a reconsideration of her investments in the social order:

I’ve always known that I’ve been a good friend to her. But now more recently I’ve started to see that maybe it was more one way than I thought. Even though she says to me ‘oh you’re my best friend, you’re really great’. But is she just saying that because she wants me to keep coming back? And giving her... even though the advice I give her many not work but... like... I feel sometimes that I’m more like a therapist to her than I am a friend.

It was her concern for this friend which had contributed towards the diminished options available to Mary prior to university, as her condition rendered all manner of everyday social opportunities potentially problematic. Having ‘sacrificed a lot’ for her, this friend’s sudden act of casual disregard prompted Mary to begin to question ‘what has she actually done for me?’ in a way tied up with many broader questions about how she relates to others and the value she placed on the well-being of the relations in which she is embedded:

I’m noticing a lot that, in when I talk to people, I ask them a lot of questions but I never really get asked any back. I think it’s not just... it’s specifically Jane, my friend, but I think it happens in a lot of the relationships that I have. Apart from my friend Alice who I think out of all my uni friends is my closest friend. I think that’s because, similarly to my family, I don’t have to

worry about her, like, wanting advice or something. Because she just wants to have a chat.

These deliberations naturally outstripped narrow reconsideration of how her friend related to her, given Mary's meta-reflexive propensity to engage with such questions in a way which 'bends back' upon her own activity, considering how and why she has come to relate in this way rather than simply considering the consequences.

Maybe it's just cos I don't like awkward silences so I try to fill them... and then with questions... and then that may come across as being like, a bit I don't know... being more like a therapist, asking questions [...] but if I didn't do that then I don't know what would conversations be like. Would they be boring? Or, like, would they not have anything... I don't think I will change that but I'm just more aware of it now I think. I won't really... there's nothing I can do. Because I can't say to people 'can you ask me more questions?' can I? So there's not a lot I can do... But I'm more aware of it.

It's difficult not to speculate that this is precisely what many of the conversations might be like within her existing circle, with her discomfort at 'awkward silences' being a manifestation of an underlying concern for the harmonious reproduction of her proximal relations (Archer 2000). Her relations with one close friend (who just 'wants to have a chat') and her family (with whom she doesn't 'have to be trying to encourage people or help them') provide an obvious instance of relationality which doesn't have to be worked at in the manner which is true of much of her social circle. Over the course of the research period, her participation in a campus choir

was an increasingly important source of friendship, in spite of the initial ‘cliqeyness’ (i.e. relationality which she is external to) she encountered there. This pattern of relating around shared participation, with the opportunity for ‘escape’ it presents from an increasingly ‘claustrophobic’ living situation, points towards where her pattern of relating might shift, as does the pattern of relating around shared values, embodied in her familial relations and, to a lesser extent, with her best friend at university (Archer 2012: 222-35). Particularly in relation to the latter, she recognises how different the relationality of her family is from those she encounters at university,

I don’t want to be bad but I don’t think they’re as close with their families as I am. Because my mum and my dad, they mean the world to me, they are like... they’re like having friends really. Like we joke and laugh and we have a really good time. I have just as good a time with my family as I do my friends. And I wouldn’t be able... well if I had to pick I probably would pick my family over my friends [...] I feel much more at ease when I’m with my family. I don’t feel like I have to put on, like ... I’m a very caring person and I listen to people’s problems and I’ll give advice to people and all my friends and stuff. When I’m with my family, it’s a time where I don’t have to be like ‘oh, don’t worry’. Like I can just... I don’t have to worry about anybody else.

Understanding Mary’s trajectory into university and the changes she underwent once there requires that we understand the origins of this judgement in her own experience, particularly the disjunctive relationality which characterised her experiences at college. Figure 1 illustrates her family relations, as a high receipt of

relational goods lead her to value her family, as well as the norms endorsed and enforced within it. She is profoundly at ease within her family and recognises the grounds of this subjective comfort in the particular qualities of these relations. In contrast Figure 2 illustrates her peer relations at college, as her two close friends marginalised her while orientating themselves both to their respective boyfriends but also to the shared experience of their respective relationships (e.g. ‘we can’t see you tonight, we’re busy seeing our boyfriends’). This absence of social opportunities engendered a concern to cultivate future opportunities in her new context but, more mundanely, it left her spending lots of her time with her family and, in doing so, worked to reproduce, entrench and strengthen the relational goods which were features of her family life. So in this sense we can identify two effects of the conjunction between her friendship relations and her family relations: reproducing and entrenching the relational goods within her family (1) but nonetheless orientating her towards the pursuit of similar relational goods which were, at best, fleeting with her friendship relations (2)<sup>94</sup>. Much as with Jess, encountered in the previous chapter, the conjunction between friendship relations and family relations works to engender a significantly different tendency to that likely to arise from either set of relations in itself. In these circumstances the receipt of high relational goods within the family becomes an enablement to facilitate exploration<sup>95</sup>, the motivation

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<sup>94</sup> The point here is not that ‘relational evils’ were present within her friendship relations, at least not as far as could be ascertained within the interviews. It illustrates how absences can be efficacious, at least if one has a frame of reference (such as warm, trusting and caring family relations) which enables one to identify the absence of these goods amidst one’s friendship relations

<sup>95</sup> The term ‘exploration’ is intended as shorthand to convey a move beyond the present context, embracing the situational logic of opportunity and pursuing variety (new things to know, new things to do, new things to be) in a manner which is purposive though lacks a substantive end. The generic motivation for such exploration is a failure to project(s) worthy of endorsement within the natal context. In this sense ‘exploration’ can be understood as a biographical moment, experienced by increasing numbers with the intensification of the reflexive imperative, within the broader process of ‘shaping a life’ (Archer 2012: 97-124).

for which arises outside of the family, whereas otherwise they would engender a tendency towards identification with the natal context (Archer 2012). Figure 9 shows the relations between the relations which engendered her move to university and the orientation towards the task of shaping a life in this new context.

Figure 8

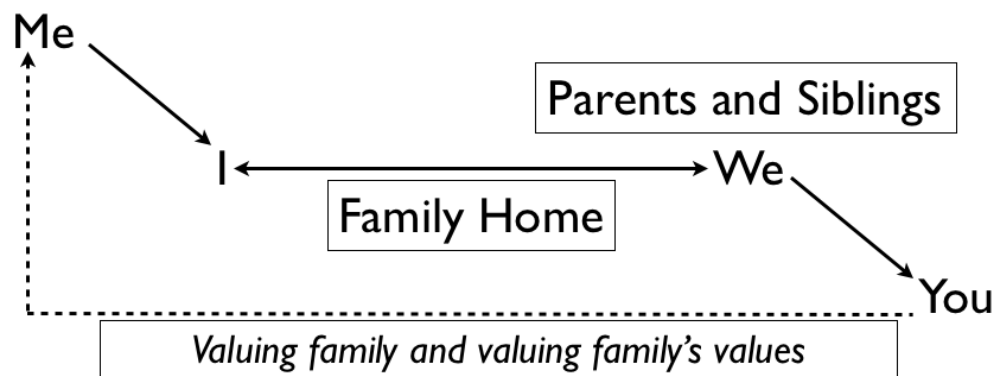


Figure 9

What is important to grasp is the sense in which such activity is unquestionably purposive, in spite of what is likely to be the seeming opacity of these purposes. One can search for 'more' without being able to specify precisely what this 'more' is.



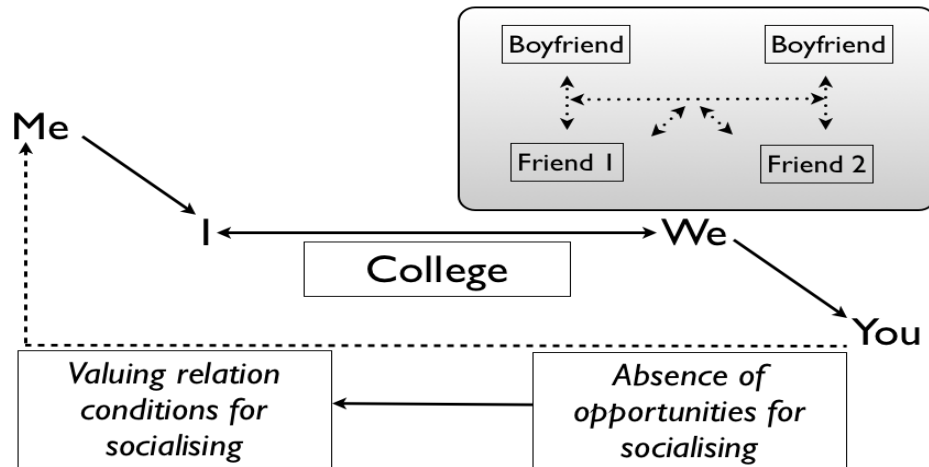
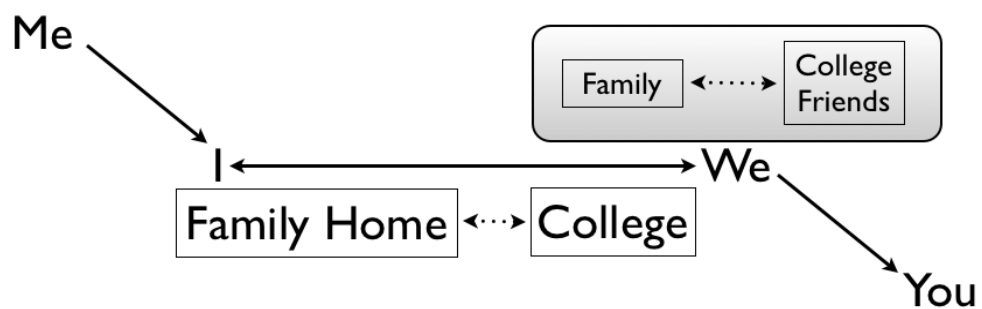


Figure 10



Two specific concerns were carried into her new context from the old, arising from familial relations and peer relations respectively. From the former, with a trusting and consensual family life facilitating the embrace of ethical and political messages

which Mary recognised her parents as having ‘taught’ her, she valued tolerance (C1) and it guided her action through framing certain modes of orientation towards others as open, accepting and non-judgemental. From the latter, with her few friends prioritising their boyfriends over her and the absence of further relations which would facilitate having the social life she hoped for, she valued friendliness (C2) and it guided her action through framing her new opportunities for cultivating friendships as first and foremost things to be valued<sup>96</sup>, as well as leading her to invest herself in ensuring the health of the relational matrix which emerged within the rather claustrophobic milieu of her university accommodation. Under certain circumstances C1 and C2 would have been compatible because, it must be stressed, their compatibility or incompatibility only obtains in relation to a network of salient persons, themselves standing in relations with their own emergent reality. The problem for Mary came from encountering many students, on her course but most importantly within her flat, who endorsed and enforced commitments on a range of issues (with racialised discussions being the most subjectively troubling for her<sup>97</sup>) which ran contrary to her own. Her initial response was to evade this tension, continuing to endorse C1 but foregoing the situational opportunities to enforce it, in the hope of sustaining the vitality of the relational network through which she hoped to ensure the social opportunities (in the sense of opportunities for socialising) which she had lacked during college. But further normative pressures were operative, with her describing what at times was an intensely claustrophobic atmosphere with much sniping and scrutiny underway within the relatively closed confines of the university

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<sup>96</sup> As opposed to opportunities to be filtered prior to some being valued.

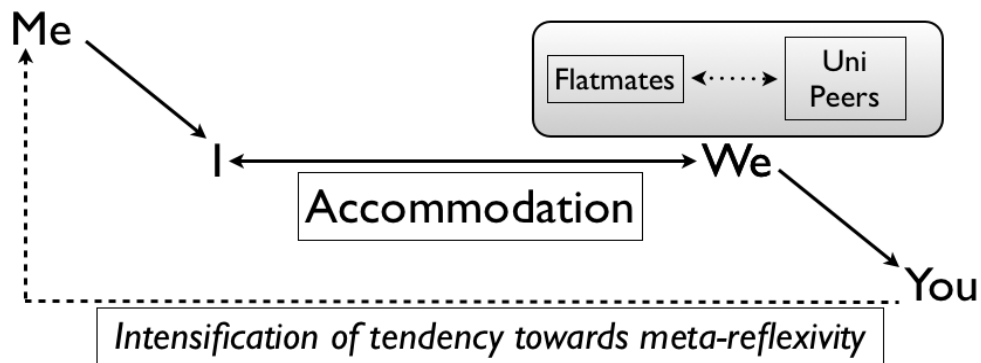
<sup>97</sup> These were by no means the only ones that were troubling. Debates about unions and labour disputes were particularly problematic given that Mary tied her mother’s values, in turn seen as (partly) the source of her own, so tightly to her work in these areas. As such, the dispute ceases to be susceptible to abstraction and becomes one of person X acting contrary to Mary, her family and the left-wing values they are reciprocally oriented towards.

flat. Along with the self-censorship arising as she compartmentalised C1 in the interests of C2, this worked to intensify her underlying propensity towards meta-reflexivity, as her day-to-day life came to involve a troubling mixture of normative rumination and social contortion. This is represented in Figure 12, intended to highlight how the intensification of this tendency fermented through interaction, (predominantly) within the situated milieu of her university accommodation, in turn conditioned the ‘me’ which dispositionally manifested in the ‘I’ she brought into interaction with this particular stratum of her ‘we’, with this feedback loop further strengthening this underlying tendency as the more meta-reflexive she became, the more her interaction with this reference group fuelled her tendency towards meta-reflexivity. The more prone she became to this sort of intensive deliberation about self and circumstances, the more difficult it became for her to participate in what seemed to be the strongly communicative practice of ‘thought and talk’ which dominated within the flat<sup>98</sup>. This growing proclivity for problematising the social, partly engendered by C1 as inflected through the relations within the flat and within her peer group at university more broadly, actively worked to erode the satisfactoriness and sustainability of the friendships which (C2) she had been so committed to perpetuating.

Figure 11

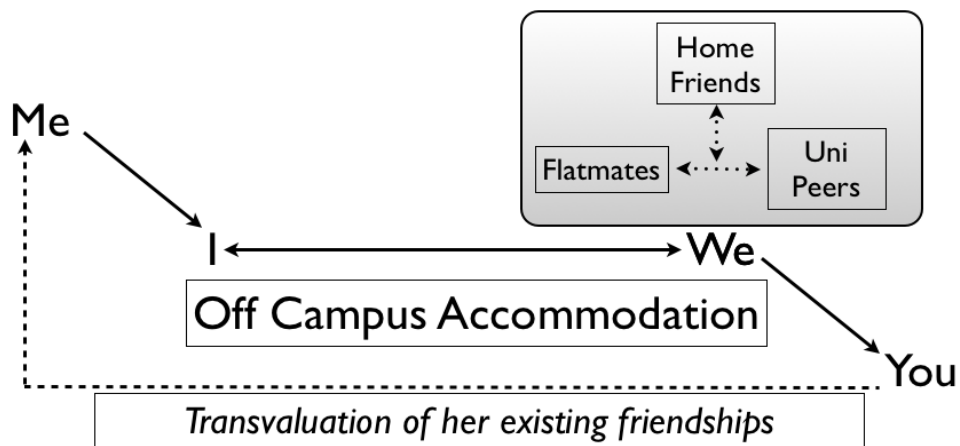
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<sup>98</sup> This is another instance where the individualised limitations of interview based research precluded investigation of the relational characteristics apparently at work. Nonetheless, the interview data strongly indicated that ‘thought and talk’ predominated within her friendship group. At the very least, the perception on Mary’s part that others cast her in the role of interlocutor is what is relevant to the causal claim being made here.



As the year went on, the character of these friendships and the influences upon her social dispositions which ensued from them worked to undermine the emergence of the relational goods, the pursuit of which had so animated her entry into social life at university. This process was temporarily abated over the summer, during which time she was able to return to her continually rewarding family relationships, only to further intensify with the move to off-campus accommodation, with Mary occupying the smallest room in a house located within a relatively distant part of the local town. What had initially been a case of precluding the emergence of relational goods increasingly became a matter of emergent relational evils, with Mary's continuous self-monitoring vis-à-vis her flatmates beginning to produce distrust and anxiety to a degree which was having negative consequences for her life more broadly. However this incipient crisis ran concurrently with a growing awareness of the asymmetric nature of her relationships, which manifested disjointedly through a number of particular crisis points to bringing about a transvaluation of her existing friendships, depicted below.

Figure 12



As the year progressed, she became increasingly critical of the relations situated within the house, as well as the longstanding friendships which had so shaped her orientation towards university. This newly critical evaluation went hand-in-hand with a further deepening of her commitment to her family and the beginning of a transformation in her horizon of social opportunities at university, not as distinguishable effects but rather as three aspects of the same process.

## Fractured Reflexivity

We met Holly, a 21 year old business student, in the previous chapter. She was a few years older than the other participants and, unlike them, did not live on campus, with the result that she found herself a step removed from the frantic social activity around her. She lived with her mother, stepfather and her young son in a town near the university. While she had been born in Britain, she had lived on the other side of the world for 16 years and, as well as two international relocations, her childhood

and adolescence had involved frequent instances of moving home<sup>99</sup>, with this contextual discontinuity engendering an early proclivity towards autonomous reflexivity. This had begun to subside, with geographical ‘settling down’ going hand-in-hand with a more settled family life, as Holly’s mother was in a ‘completely different’ marriage and much happier as a result. Nonetheless contextual change was a familiar experience to her and she was able to see the value in it, as Holly described in the family’s move back to Britain:

I think we moved less often then but then we were only there for 2 years before we decided that we wanted to move to England. So I spent the third year preparing to move to England. So that was a bit strange because we had to move house from the house that we owned to the house that we were just going to rent. And we had to sell all our stuff which was a bit scary. But it wasn’t too bad ... I moved the December before I turned 16. So two months before I became 16 we moved ... it was quite upsetting actually cos obviously we’d been there 16 years and we had all our close friends but at the same I was like ‘maybe it’s time for a change? It will be interesting to see how things are over here’.

Despite the understandable fears attached to the move, particularly those pertaining to moving to a new school and repeating part of the school year<sup>100</sup>, she soon felt settled in her new school, a process of acclimatisation assisted by the fact her twin

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<sup>99</sup> The particular circumstances pose an interesting question of the quality and quantity of discontinuity: ‘I’ve had around 30 houses in my life. We’ve moved house but mum’s always made sure we could stick to the same school because she thought we needed something stable in our lives ... they were all within 10/15 minutes of each other’.

<sup>100</sup> The school systems in her former country of residence and the UK operate on different schedules so, even though Holly had finished the year in the former the decision was made to effectively repeat the year upon returning to the latter.

sister was placed in many of the same classes as her. Nonetheless, there was a disjunctive aspect to her experience of transitioning from a foreign school to one in the UK, manifesting itself through the contrasting proclivities which predominated amongst her peers at school in both nations:

They try to act a lot more grown up than they do [back there]. So they just sort of force themselves on you and they, like... we had one person just bounced right up to us on the first day, which was a bit daunting. I think over here they try to be a lot more streetwise. Whereas [back there] , we're just so relaxed... the main event for us is 'let's go to the beach'. Whereas over here they're like 'oh let's do this, let's try and sneak into that pub, let's do this'. That had never crossed our minds.

Holly described how, having 'decided that I'd had enough of that school', she moved to a nearby college for sixth form which was 'more like the high school we went to [back there]'. It was at this college that her propensity towards autonomous reflexivity began to manifest itself, with Holly recounting her confusion that her peers at the previous school 'all said they hated the place but 'they still stayed on' into the sixth form attached to the school. To her, it seemed obvious that 'if you don't like the place, get out' and, having done this, she threw herself into life at the new college. Her sister also joined, with different choices leaving them on completely different courses. Nonetheless, they were still able to spend much time together, with each bringing a different group of new friends and contributing to a largely harmonious mix.

It was at this point that she encountered the law, taught by a particularly inspiring teacher who had formerly been a magistrate. Holly was fascinated by the professional experience of this teacher, experiencing it in marked contrast to the textbook based learning which she saw as dominating her other courses. This soon began to engender a real fascination with the law itself, further entrenched as she began to recognise her own proficiency, increasingly coming to see herself as self-motivated describing how ‘with the subjects I enjoy, I find it easy to remember things but with the ones I’m not so interested in I really struggle’. At this stage Holly had planned ‘on doing A levels and going straight to uni’ but revised this plan upon learning that she was pregnant, before splitting from her partner engendered further instability in her life,

I had planned on doing A levels and going straight to uni. But then I found out that I was pregnant so I thought ‘oh that wouldn’t be a good idea’ because he would only be 5 months old and I didn’t want him in nursery at that age. So I decided to stay home. Then when I split with my partner and moved back in with Mum she goes ‘well it would be easier for you to go to uni now, you’ve got some money behind you and we can put you up’ and so I didn’t have to worry about rent and food and everything.

It is important to recognise the temporal sequencing here. Firstly, upon learning she is pregnant, Holly adapts her existing plan to novel circumstances through projecting forward to anticipate the future consequences of that plan for her child<sup>101</sup>. Secondly, upon splitting from her partner, when her son was one and a half, she fell back upon

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<sup>101</sup> This is an example of how autonomous reflexives come closest to the Giddensian motif of ‘colonizing the future’ (Giddens 1991).

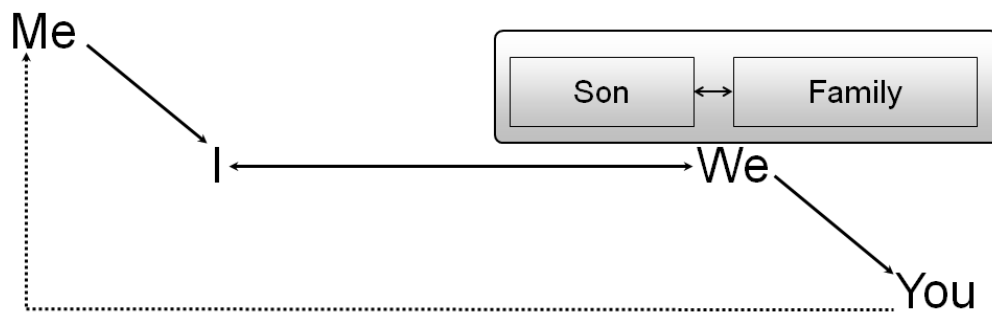


familial support while still retaining her commitment to her prior plan. So while these events brought significant upheaval to her life, they were nonetheless negotiated in a manner orientated towards sustaining existing projects (going to university to study Law) even while other aspects of her expected future (her engagement to her fiancé) had to be jettisoned because ‘things didn’t go quite right’. In enacting such a response to changing circumstances, Holly was able to draw upon relational goods within her close knit family<sup>102</sup>, with her sister immediately intervening (‘she came over whenever she could’ and rang her every day) during the breakup and her mother immediately inviting her to move in once she returned from the holiday she had been on at the time. In retrospect Holly credited her decision to this support, suggesting that ‘otherwise I probably would have stayed there and not been at all happy’. This trust that her family would provide her ‘somewhere else’ to go enabled her to take a decision which, particularly given her young son, she might not have otherwise made. These experiences brought her still closer to her family, in spite of what had been a tendency to drift slightly apart from her sister due to their different paths through college, fortifying the trust and solidarity upon which her ‘exit strategy’ from the relationship with her child’s father had depended.

Figure 13

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<sup>102</sup> Which was described in the interviews in a way suggestive of intense solidarism, forged through collective negotiation of often difficult (shared) changes.



At this point Holly had already been working, having begun temping in the February after the summer she finished her exams<sup>103</sup>, before finding a permanent job a couple of months later. She worked there for a year and a half prior to coming to university, with her ‘understanding’ and ‘really nice’ employer allowing her to circumvent the normal hours in order to fit her work around her son’s nursery times. This extensive workplace experience represented a continuation of the existing plan, albeit in a slightly adapted form, as Holly describing how she ‘went to work to get some money behind me to go uni’ which, in turn, constituted a crucial project in a broader life plan:

Well the only image that I’ve got for my life is that I want to finish uni, get a job, buy a nice little house that I can support myself and my son with and then just enjoy my career. So this is just a step on the way.

What had initially been solely a commitment to a career in law, fermented through the teaching she enjoyed at college which additionally served to model such a career in the figure of the former magistrate teacher, was supplemented by a commitment to

<sup>103</sup> She gave birth to her son the month before taking the exams.

such a career as a means to ensure she is able to support her son. In a sense then her commitment to her career had been subordinated to her newfound ultimate concern for the well-being of her son. However stating this so baldly risks occluding her continuing investment in such a career for its own qualities, particularly her intellectual interest and concern to explore her performative competence through a sustained engagement with a field of activity she finds herself drawn towards<sup>104</sup>.

Nonetheless she was forced to adapt to circumstances and, in order to understand her trajectory into and through university, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of this adaptation. As discussed, the arrival of her son necessitated a form of temporising in which university was postponed in order to facilitate financial preparation. Likewise, the breakup of her relationship led her to move into her mother's house. All these circumstances necessitated adaptation. So too did her failure to get the grades she had needed for straight law. All these factors shaped how she approached the decision-making process for university, with Holly choosing the university with the 'best reputation' closest to her mother's house and deciding to combine law with business in view of its expected 'helpfulness' in future. This necessitated foregoing another local university, with a much less prestigious reputation which nonetheless offered the course she wanted. Nonetheless, she passed up this opportunity, deciding that Law and Business would 'be more practical' than the Law and English course which would have allowed her to continue studying the latter, which she had always 'loved'. In contrast, she had never studied business before and soon found herself 'out of my comfort zone'.

The unfamiliarity of the subject matter found itself compounded by the challenges of reacquainting herself with study after a hiatus of almost two years, as

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<sup>104</sup> See Archer (2000, 2007) on the practical order and autonomous reflexivity.

well as the logistical issues entailed by reconciling the pressures of childcare, commuting and studying. In the first interview, in the second term of her first year, Holly described how in retrospect she ‘found working easier because here you’ve got to go to your class and you’ve got the hours in between to study and when you get home you’ve also got to write it all up as well’. She found herself missing the clear demarcation provided by the working day, looking back fondly on the structure of a 9-5 while in her present circumstances ‘private time and home time gets mixed up together’. She described in the first interview how ‘I’ve planned what I want to do in the future but getting there, I haven’t planned much at all’ and how she’s ‘taking it as it comes’. As the interviews progressed, it soon became clear how practically demanding her day-to-day life was, as she strove to be an effective student without impeding the role of mother which was her ultimate concern (Archer 2000). The practical exigencies of daily life and their attendant affect tended to crowd out the deliberation necessary to enact her priorities. As she put it, ‘I try to prioritise but sometimes things get put to one side and then I keep forgetting about them and have to go back to them’. Each term brought a new timetable and these shifting institutional arrangements, often inconsistent as a result of a disorganised structure for dual honours students and necessitating proactive resolution on her part, precluded the formulation of routines, as did her son’s changing needs and proclivities. All the while Holly was forced to study in the gaps, trying to find time to work without interruption, while the prospect of time entirely for herself was usually a distant one. Her impeded autonomous reflexivity had its genesis in these situational exigencies, as she was able to sustain a commitment to her overarching project (‘finish uni, get a job, buy a nice little house that I can support myself and Lawrence with and then just enjoy my career’) but the demands of everyday life

recurrently squeezed out this longer term frame of reference,

you have this whole plan set out and then something happens to distract it and so you go to that and you think ‘I’ll go back to that as soon as that’s sorted’ and then something else comes up, like with my son being off last week, even though he was off sick and he was sleeping for a lot of it. Because he was sleeping he wanted me to be with him the whole time, if I moved he’d wake up, so I had to make sure I had everything with me there and then, I couldn’t get up to get it cos then he’d wake up and then he’d want attention and cuddling and everything.

Though this judgement is obviously reliant on her own retrospective accounts during the interviews, it seemed Holly had been organised during her time at college. Yet she now regarded herself as anything but. The intensity of situational pressures means she literally cannot keep track of things in a sustained way. The sheer weight of concerns competing for her attention in everyday life, as commitments to her son and to her education both worked to preclude the establishment of routine, with Holly describing how ‘I never have that set pattern of sleep, so I’m constantly tired’; a problem intensified by the tendency to be ‘thinking of other things on top of it which you don’t really want to be thinking about it and it sort of drains you a bit more’. Holly was someone who actively sought to routinize her activities, feeling most comfortable when she could say ‘right, this is what I’m going to do’ with clearly defined strategies adapted to a predictable context<sup>105</sup>. Though she could ‘cope

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<sup>105</sup> This highlights the potential for ambiguity in the term ‘routine’. In this case, the term is used to refer to an *end* which is deliberately sought. So when someone describes themselves as striving for ‘routine’, it would be inaccurate to interpret this in terms of the negation of reflexivity, as opposed to it being exercised in an apophatic mode (Mouzelis 2010).

with the occasional change' she described how 'stressed out' she recurrently felt as a result of the frequency with which things would be 'completely thrown about'. As she put it, 'I just want to know what I'm doing' and yet circumstances so often worked to preclude this, necessitating deliberation of an intensity and continuity which ran contrary to her prior establishment of autonomous reflexivity and which she experienced as profoundly draining, further eroding her capacity to deal with situational exigencies and to sustain a deliberate mode of reflexivity through them. She was someone inclined to lists and diaries, yet so many immediate issues demands her attention that they served to 'blot out' the self-talk necessary to sustain the use of these reflexive technologies, with Holly describing how 'I write something down on Monday and then it comes to the Friday and I forget to check what it was on Monday's thing that I had to do'. Meanwhile, her circumstances continue to change as she moves through her degree, with new rights and obligations attached to her new positions within the institution working to further preclude the establishment of routine. Perhaps most pressingly, the expectation that students in her position apply for internships, widely understood as being a necessary to secure employment, which is itself integral to her overarching life project. The situational pressures mount but without any impending relief from the underlying factors in her life which undermine her capacity to cope with them, depleting the personal resources she brings to bear on these challenges just when she needs them most. Things do not stand still and neither does she; her impeded autonomous reflexivity should not be construed as passivity, but rather as a recurrent inability to draw out the linkages between the situational and the biographical, so as to manifest long term plans through short term actions, instead leaving her negotiating each day on an ad hoc basis, animated by a sense of overarching concerns but struggling to approach daily

life with sufficient poise to find manifestation for them in sustained courses of action.

## **Personal Morphogenesis and Conflation**

In this chapter the morphogenetic explanatory framework, introduced in the first section of the thesis, has been deployed in order to explain the personal changes undergone by four illustrative subjects in the course of their first two years at university. The intention has been to demonstrate that biographical processes can best be understood morphogenetically, as constituted through cycles of evaluatively-orientated interaction by a subject within a relational network, contributing (variably) to the (re)shaping of the individual, the network and the social milieu within which they are embedded. In doing so, it has reconnected the empirical case study to the broader theoretical concerns, introduced in the first section of the thesis, which animated it. The diagrams presented are not understood as exhaustive depictions of the changes undergone by a subject but rather as analytical devices used to (fallibly) represent the interpenetrating mechanisms driving change, their ensuing implications and the sequencing of these cycles over a tract of the life course.

However more work remains and this will be task of the final two chapters, which utilises the material from the case studies to explicitly formulate an account of personal morphogenesis. The explanatory power of such an account will be demonstrated through a critique of Crossley's relational sociology, drawing on the discussion in Chapter Two, specifically the actualism entailed by the mutual absence of a substantive concept of relations (as opposed to iterated interaction) and

psychobiography (as opposed to a meta-identity integrating situated narratives). This critique will be a point of contrast for the elaboration of a positive account of personal morphogenesis, drawing upon the theoretical arguments from the first section of this thesis and their deployment and refinement through the empirical case study detailed in the second section of the thesis.

The final chapter then addresses this framework to the themes introduced in the critique of Giddens and the detraditionalisation thesis which occupied much of its first section. It argues that an account of the biographical dimensions of social and cultural change necessitates a theory of the morphogenesis of the person, without which claims about the micro and the macro will simply amalgamate the specific and the general (as in Giddens) or preclude their connection by collapsing the objective and the subjective into a perpetually interactive intersubjectivity (as in Crossley). The former only engages with the T1 and T4 of personal morphogenesis, in so far as it posits subjects able to be impacted upon by epochal changes in their conditions of life (T1) and claims are made about what these impacts are for said subjects (T4). What is missing is any concrete account of the processes bringing about particular changes in particular persons under particular circumstances. In contrast Crossley's relational sociology conceptualises the T2-T3 but lacks the conceptual resources to account for how either persons or relations are elaborated as a result of this interaction. Instead, it is argued that an account of the morphogenesis of the person (encompassing the conditioned 'me', the interactive 'I' in relation to its 'we' and the elaborated, as well subsequently conditioning, 'you'). The subject encountered in the later Giddens<sup>106</sup> is a creature of depth psychology, either pushed and pulled by

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<sup>106</sup> The properties of which, it has been argued, ensue from but are not equal to those imputed to subjectivity within his earlier work.



the rampaging ‘global forces’ or colonising the future with an aggressive rationality which is phenomenologically and conceptually implausible.

The subject encountered in Crossley is an intrinsically social creature, reflecting the Meadian foundations upon which it has been crafted, elaborating itself narratively through the ceaseless iteration of relational interaction. The former manages to be alternately under and over socialised while, as argued in the first chapter, systematically precluding the elaboration of conceptual instruments which would aid investigators in establishing when, how and why one orientation rather than the other obtain. In practice, this account of subjectivity stabilises into an actualist voluntarism<sup>107</sup>, reliant on narratives of ‘fateful moments’ and ‘turning points’. The latter account is more carefully crafted, as well as conceptually rigorous, than the schizoid self found in the Giddensian story of late modern life. But it suffers from a parallel internal contradiction, with the overly-socialised T4 rendered feasible by the Median account of subjectivity standing in an obvious tension with Crossley’s narrative understanding of the ‘me’ as a ‘character in a story told by the I’ (Crossley 2010: 94). Substantive changes undergone by a person in the past are subsumed into the narrative reconstruction of those changes by a present self. The problem here is two-fold. Firstly, changes in self are collapsed into changes in self-concept<sup>108</sup>, risking the same slide into actualism ensuing from the ‘fateful moments’ of Giddens despite their substantially different theoretical starting points. Secondly, the past and present are elided, leaving no space for an ‘I’ beyond that of the story-telling, crafting a meta-identity through knitting together the reconstructed narratives of the situated ‘me’ accumulated by the subject. Both accounts fundamentally misrepresent

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<sup>107</sup> Leaving aside its roots in structurationist theory which, though certainly problematic, exhibited a careful conceptualisation of a form entirely lacking in the Giddens of the ‘90s onwards.

<sup>108</sup> The former encompasses the latter but exceeds it.

the temporal extension of human personhood and, through doing so, carry all manner of direct and indirect consequences for their deployment in empirical research. In contrast, it is argued that the morphogenetic approach, applied at the level of biography to delineate cycles of personal morphogenesis, offers a more secure and fruitful footing for social research utilising individual biography as a unit of analysis. When coupled with the account of reflexivity offered in Archer's more recent work, it offers a compelling alternative to the grossly deficient detraditionalisation thesis, offering a robust framework for the multi-dimensional investigation of individual lives which also facilitates the systematic linkage of these micro processes to meso and macro trends.



## **Chapter 7. Personal Morphogenesis**

The previous two chapters were primarily concerned with the empirical case study which has been central to the project undertaken in this thesis. In the former, the explanatory focus was directed at the trajectories into university, examining the variation identifiable in how participants came to leave their natal contexts and enrol at university. It was stressed that explaining such trajectories entails attending to the relational characteristics of the circumstances they encountered as children and adolescents, initially in terms of familial relations but then in terms of peer relations and the relations between these two sets of relations. In the latter chapter, the explanatory focus was directed at the everyday life of participants while they were at university, with a number of case studies illustrating how the approach being adopted could offer causal explanations of individual trajectories without subtracting from the meaning and force of these changes for the individual concerned. The presentation of data has been limited in its scope because the case study from which it was drawn served the dual purpose of providing an empirical framework through which the concept of ‘personal morphogenesis’ could be elaborated while also serving as an illustrative case study of how morphogenetic analysis can be deployed at the level of the personal. This chapter serves as the bridge between the empirical case study and the broader concerns of this thesis, reflecting upon the themes which emerged in the case studies and using them to articulate a substantive account of personal morphogenesis. The first section discusses Archer’s (2000, 2007) engagements with biographical questions before turning to the explication of personal morphogenesis which has been the central aim of this thesis. This analytical framework isolates the relations through which personal change occurs and their

temporal sequencing.

## **Critical Realism and Biography**

The early chapters of this thesis introduced the concepts of ‘psychobiography’ and ‘personal morphogenesis’ in order to address the lifecourse and individual transitions respectively. While the former constitutes the unit of analysis, the life as a whole and the linked series of transitions undergone by the individual living it, the latter focuses on the dynamics of specific changes. In doing so, the concept of personal morphogenesis helps us ‘open up’ the developmental trajectories theorised in Archer (2000) and the biographical trajectories studied by Archer (2007, 2012). Both addressed tendencies which manifest themselves over the lifecourse, with the most pressing for present purposes being Archer’s account of the emergence of personal and social identity. What is crucial to note is the intention that it ‘accentuates emergent properties and powers at every stage’, affirming the ‘primacy of practice’<sup>109</sup> while also ‘giving due to everyone’s societal encounter’ (Archer 2000: 116). This developmental account of the emergence of personal and social identity, contrasted to a lifelong account, begins with the involuntary enmeshment of the individual within society’s structural and cultural properties (Archer 2000: 261-8). This assignment to positions within society’s distribution of resources entails the influence of causal powers which impinge upon us without our ‘compliance, consent

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<sup>109</sup> See Archer (2000: 121-53). This issue is addressed indirectly through the critique of Crossley, particularly in this chapter, who goes part of the way towards affirming the primacy of practice. This reflects an influence of Merleau-Ponty common to both Archer and Crossley. However practice, to Crossley, is subsequently inflected through Meadian pragmatism and Bourdeusian neo-structuralism. Alexander’s (1995) penetrating critique of Bourdieu’s habitus as a ‘trojan horse for determinism’ offers useful insights into the trajectory of Crossley’s thought to this end, particularly the tension between his understanding of practice and his concern to affirm reflexivity.

or complicity'. This involuntary situatedness may not an immutable feature of the natal context throughout childhood and adolescence because neither familial circumstances nor wider social conditions remain static while a child grows. It is through the dependency of the 'I' (to be) upon the 'we' (caregivers, parental or otherwise) that the child finds their life-chances emerging through the social placement of caregivers, who exercise reflexivity in relation to this situatedness in a way the child cannot even begin to. However the child can and does become aware of this involuntary placement, not as a proto-sociologist reflecting on life chances but as an embodied being with emergent cares encountering day-to-day manifestations of objectively determined life chances,

[t]he most basic of these reflections is an early recognition of constraints and enablements - as in the child who questions 'why can't I have more to eat, or a bike?', versus the one who learns that its 'wants list' is always much better satisfied than those of its peers. Both understand that they have a place in the social world which is independent of (and oblivious to) their own exertions. Scarce resources do not become less so through clamouring. Probably the recognition is earlier and easier where constraints are concerned, because the ready satisfaction of wants can more readily be mistaken for the effects of our egocentric powers. (Archer 2000: 264).

As well as this increasing familiarity with the vexatious capacity of social circumstances to facilitate the meeting of some wants and to thwart others, the nascent 'I' comes to discover that many characteristics attached to 'me' are evaluated either positively or negatively by others. As Archer puts it, 'the "I" may be

distressed to learn that its “Me” is considered to speak with the wrong accent, to be of a disfavoured colour or gender’ or “‘I” may be gratified that there is something about “Me” which is to be lived up to in order to keep my position’ (Archer 2000: 264). These normative judgements pertaining, directly or indirectly<sup>110</sup>, to an individual are conditioned by their relationships to a caregiving ‘we’ (as a response to an inherited social placement) and also mediated through these relationships. It is this involuntary placement which engenders what proclivity exists for primary agents, passively sharing an involuntary social position, to form into corporate agents, coordinating their action to pursue shared goals. The former are ‘confined to the “Me”, and seek to make-out within the confines of the existing socio-cultural structure, rather than being able to become part of an active “We”, which seeks strategically to transform this structure in order to make it a better place within which to live’ (Archer 2000: 268-9). Both primary agency and corporate agency condition the actor which a person becomes; the former through the constellation of constraints and enablements encountered as the individual makes their way through the world, the latter through its shaping of the social roles available and the degree to which participation does or does not leave them ‘more articulate about their interests and thus better able to reflect upon the role positions which will further their realisation’ (Archer 2000: 284)<sup>111</sup>.

One crucial aspect of this account which must be stressed is the empirical priority of agents over actors<sup>112</sup>. As Archer (2011: 86) puts it, ‘agency makes more

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<sup>110</sup> Unless we make this distinction, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the developmental claims of a judgement directed at an individual and those directed at a collectivity which the individual recognises their own placement in terms of.

<sup>111</sup> This summary focuses on the person in the interests of brevity, unavoidably glossing over many features of a complex account. See Archer (2000: 268-88) or Archer (1995) for a full discussion

<sup>112</sup> Though these are temporal and analytical distinctions rather than invoking distinct entities (Archer 2000: 287).

room for the actor' because the priority of the former over the latter means that the array of roles available for the actor to invest themselves in is mutable, with the role array constituting one of the primary outcomes (and often aims) of the struggles between corporate agents. But this still leaves the question of how and why persons come to invest themselves as actors in the roles that they do. These choices are inflected through their constitution as primary agents (the life chances attached to their position, the opportunity costs attendant upon courses of action and the normative evaluations they are subject to in virtue of their position) and as corporate agents<sup>113</sup> (the contribution intended or otherwise which their agency has on the positional structure of society, on the role array or on they themselves through their participation). But explaining the choices themselves, so as to account for the acquisition of social identity as individuals become actors, requires an account of personal identity. This is what human beings strive towards as they tentatively begin to select from the variety available, elaborating upon their understanding of both self and circumstances in the process. Our personal identity begins to be forged through the process of selecting from our concerns, crafting a configuration of projects expressive of them which is satisfying and sustainable in spite of the lack of any necessary complementarity (and often outright contradiction) between our concerns arising from the natural, practical and social orders. This is a learning process in which adolescents begin to 'inspect not only their own involuntary roles but also the lifestyles of those who have put them there, which are sifted into elements worthy of replication versus others meriting rejection' (Archer 2000: 290). Not only do 'I' discover a 'me' that has been involuntarily placed and evaluated in virtue of that

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113 Though there is not an inexorable passage from primary agency to corporate agency. Understanding the variable scope and consequences of this is integral to understanding social formations from a morphogenetic perspective. Explaining why this is so is an example of how biographical research can contribute to macro-sociological problems that would otherwise remain intractable.



placement, I come to evaluate that placement and the 'we' by virtue of which I have been placed and evaluated. It is from these faltering and uncertain beginnings that 'I' come to constitute myself as a being with these concerns, in the process seeking to find a role for myself in the world which facilitates expression of them.

Our individuation emerges from the dialectical interplay between personal identity and social identity (Maccarini 2011: 90). Our nascent personal identities shape the social roles we incline towards experimenting with. Our natal context serves to filter the possibilities available to us, enabling and encouraging certain options while constraining and discouraging others. Our selectivity emerges through our engagement with this filtering, with some able to find a *modus vivendi* to endorse within the natal context while others find themselves inclined to look beyond it in order to clarify the kind of person they wish to be and the kind of life they wish to lead. However the choices we make on the basis of this inclination towards experimentation, our actually taking action to embrace a specific role, acts back upon our personal identities. Our new roles leave us embroiled in new constraints and enablements which can be generative of new concerns or engender reflection upon the concerns which led us to embrace this role. They can drive us to reflect upon the role array itself or the positional structure of society, joining a corporate 'we' in pursuit of social change. Or, more mundanely, we can simply be mistaken. As Archer puts it, 'no job is as the neophyte sees it in prospect, and there can be unexpected satisfactions as well as dissatisfactions which are discovered' (Archer 2000: 291). Our self-knowledge and social knowledge are always imperfect but this is emphatically true of emerging adults in their initial commitments within the social order. It is through these engagements that we come to increase our self-knowledge and social knowledge, with the evaluative aspect intrinsic to them often

leading us to revise what we had assumed to be the case about what we want or what a role entails. Even where these experiments are successful, this still returns us to the internal conversation because the question remains of how much of themselves to invest in this role and how to balance this investment with the demands ensuing from their other concerns. Many roles are ‘greedy’ and potentially open-ended in their amenability to the investment of time and energy. Yet we mostly occupy multiple roles and, though the patterning of the response will vary<sup>114</sup>, what is invariant is the reliance upon causal powers at the level of the person to negotiate between these competing demands. This invocation of reflexivity, as a personal emergent power, facilitates a treatment of biographical trajectories in a connective way, with individuation occurring through the interplay between human concerns and social context (Archer 2003, 2007). It is in this sense that, as Maccarini (2011: 109) puts it, ‘the dreams, concerns and life projects of human beings are the place from which social conditions receive their “specific gravity”’.

## **Personal Morphogenesis and Biography**

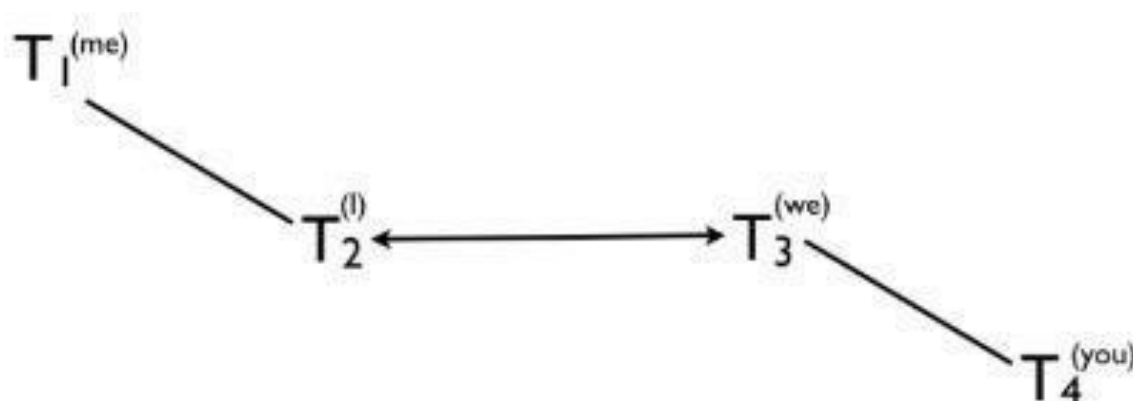
The intention of personal morphogenesis is to ‘open up’ what happens in each of these biographical phases, either in terms of the developmental trajectory described in Archer (2000) or the biographical trajectories studied by Archer (2007, 2012). It orientates the analyst towards the identification of specific cycles of personal change, unpacking circumstances at a particular point in time and examining the

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<sup>114</sup> As discussed in the next chapter, analysis of personal morphogenesis provides an incisive analytical tool for making sense of empirical variability which might otherwise remain unaccounted for. As such, it is an alternative to the way something like the detraditionalisation thesis is used, which merely thematised empirical variation in terms of fuzzy grand theoretical themes.

relational dynamics which are generative of change over time. Any such cycle is conditioned by the outcomes of a past cycle, with the propensities carried by ‘I’ being emergent from (though irreducible to<sup>115</sup>) them. The diagram below represents the basic cycle as proposed here:

Figure 1: The Generic Sequencing of Personal Morphogenesis



These are analytical distinctions, drawn in order to facilitate the examination of what is a continuous process<sup>116</sup>. They depart from Archer’s (2003) earlier work on the internal conversation, in which the morphogenesis of the person was construed in intra-active terms<sup>117</sup>, though cohere with her later recasting of reflexivity in relational terms (Archer 2012). This later turn towards the retrieval of an individual’s relations as ‘variable but powerful influences upon the equally variable outcomes’ of socialisation processes (Archer 2012: 97) invites a transition from an intra-active conception of the T2-T3 of personal morphogenesis to one which encompasses both the intra-active and interactive as generative of the reproduction or transformation of

<sup>115</sup> In the sense that a person’s properties and powers are not simply a function of the changes they have undergone, given the (variable) causal role of the natural, practical and social orders in which we all live (Archer 2000).

<sup>116</sup> Unavoidably so given that both self and circumstances continue to change over the lifecourse (Archer 2003: 114).

<sup>117</sup> See Archer (2003: 112-16). Mouzelis (2008) offers a useful and sympathetic critique of this tendency

personhood. In doing so the epistemically and methodologically motivated scepticism which sociology has tended to adopt in relation to interiority begins to look misplaced (Swedberg 2010). Through conceptualising processes of change at the level of the individual in this way, we can begin to overcome the sharp disjuncture between ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’ without dissolving one at the expense of the other or conflating the two (Macarini 2011). Instead, we can see each as moments in a process through which persons are shaped and, through the relations arising from their interaction, shape each other. As Smith puts it, ‘meeting, sharing, engagement, fellowship, and communion are constituting activities of personhood’ (Smith 2010: 73). We become who we are through our engagements with others, similarly embroiled in a lifelong process of becoming, with our particularity unfolding as an emergent reality of interaction and intra-action. If either the former or the latter are dissolved then we lose traction upon the ‘vexatious fact of society’ (Archer 1995). The main body of this chapter will address each of the three phases entailed by this model of personal morphogenesis, elaborated through a critical engagement with alternative accounts and examples from the empirical case study.

### **The Conditioning ‘Me’**

The relation invoked here has been expressed by Bauman (2013: 38) in a poetic mode: ‘[T]he site on which we build is always cluttered: the past lingers in the same “present” in which the future tries to take root’. However while Bauman claims that imprecision in theoretical formulations are often a reflection of the ‘messiness’ of their object itself, we can instead insist on unpacking this relation between past and present so as to permit analysis of how the former conditions the latter. The

underlying claim is that a past ‘me’ has acted in ways which serve to bind a present ‘I’. Such a recognition stands as a repudiation of the all too common critique of reflexivity as entailing a ‘reflexive agent that floats free of all commitments, except for those that are self-chosen’ (Burkitt 2012: 463)<sup>118</sup>. As will be discussed later in this chapter, our commitments arise in relation to the goods and evils emergent from relations which, through our action, we contribute to sustaining or allowing to deteriorate. We are always bound by commitments because we are beings to whom things matter (Sayer 2011). But this does not entail that I am now the source of my present commitments. As Archer (2003) argues,

we are not subjectively free to make what we will of the past, constructing our biographies along such story lines as we please. The ‘deposited’ features are real and impose serious limitations upon narrative freedom because any re-telling of the past has to account for them. More importantly, however we try to re-tell it, we are still shackled to our old commitments pro tem. Even those that can be shed, as in ending a marriage, take practical action in order to do so. They also continue to have consequences which are projected from the present into the future, for example, the subject then becomes a divorcee, probably with divided assets and possibly with alimony to pay. (Archer 2003: 126)

In one sense Burkitt (2012) is correct when he asks ‘surely, how we develop our concerns is not disconnected from our emotional connection, identification and dis-identification with caregivers, friends, teachers, the wide generation and society?’

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<sup>118</sup> A similar case can be found in Holmes (2010).

How could it be otherwise? These are our concerns but this does not entail that we exhaust their content (or even figure in them in anything other than a self-referential sense). Our emotions are not just feelings but orientations of care towards the world (Porpora 2003). We do not choose our commitments in the sense of detached reflection but nor do we simply internalise them from our immediate environment<sup>119</sup>. Understanding how this is so necessitates that we recognise how our past commitments constrain and enable present choices in turn conditioning our future orientation towards circumstances yet to be encountered. In doing so, we begin to gain traction upon what Mouzelis (2008: 208), critiquing its absence in Archer (2000), calls an 'internal environment of action', possessing powers of constraint and enablement which are (variably) activated in our exercise of reflexivity<sup>120</sup>. However we do so in a way which draws out the temporal sequencing so crucial to unpacking, rather than merely affirming, this variability. By delineating the conditioning 'me' from the reflexive 'I' we are able to distinguish between situations where the influence of the conditioning 'me' is minimal (e.g. Holly's approach to what she immediately realised was a radically different cultural environment in her English secondary school after her family's move from Australia) from those where deliberation is filtered through dispositions deposited in the present (e.g. Mary's overriding concern to cultivate durable relationality in her first year at university). On such a view, the distinction between minimal and maximal itself becomes something which should be treated with caution. Instead, we are left with a picture of the past 'me' conditioning a constellation of constraints and enablements acting vis-à-vis the present 'I': our past serves to filter present variety, rendering some things

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<sup>119</sup> Though morphostatic social formations may approximate to this (Archer 2012).

<sup>120</sup> An interesting example of how the concept of 'habitus' is sometimes utilised in practice can be found in Gill's (2009) discussion of the 'psychic habitus' of academics. In practice, this use of the concept amounts to a fuzzy formulation of the 'conditioning me': our present action is inflected through a dispositionality partly emergent from our past action.

salient and others not, rather than this being a matter of the dead weight of habit or its absence.

The process of personal morphogenesis, as ‘actors themselves change relationally in the very process of actively pursuing changes in the social order’ is ‘one of the principle “non-Median” ways by which the social gets inside us’ (Archer 2012: 51). This approach rejects the assumption that social influences have to be ‘internalised’ in order to be efficacious, instead looking to the social processes generative of ‘novel situations in which all agents now find themselves’ and evaluating how these are ‘constraining to the projects of some and enabling to the projects of others, yet of significance for the motivation of all’ (Archer 2012: 54). The issue at stake here has broader connotations for sociological explanation, particularly for the conceptualisation of micro-macro links, but it ultimately rests on competing understandings of the role of habit in relation to that of reflexivity:

There are two fundamental ways in which the relation between habits and reflexivity can be conceptualised: one sees the two in tension and producing intra-personal struggles, whilst the other views reflexive, innovative action as built upon habitual dispositions. The first is antipathetic to ‘hybridisation’; the second endorses it. The former is hospitable to people’s purposeful commitments, the latter is hostile. The one can accentuate macroscopic ‘contextual discontinuity’ as a spur to reflexivity; the other emphasises minute quotidian continuities at the micro-level. (Archer 2012: 61)

In contrast to the latter view, which sees reflexivity as something exercised only when situational novelty leads to the failure of routine action, the Peircean notion of self sees habitus and reflexivity in terms of a ‘struggle on the part of the commitment and innovative “I” to overcome the inertia of the habitualized “me” (or critical self), as Peirce pictures in his famous courtroom analogy where the advocate of change marshals his case against the deepest dispositions that have been developed biographically’. This entails a much greater degree of freedom on the part of the agent, with imagination existing in relation to the ‘social variation and cultural variety available to ponder upon reflexively’ (Archer 2012: 59-61). But this imagination is irrevocably social because of its dependence upon social and cultural variety as the ‘raw materials’ underlying imaginative flights of fancy. In making this move we secure the relative autonomy of reflexivity from the ‘action situation’ (Joas 2000) and in doing so avoid the central conflationism which inevitably ensues from a flat ontology of recurrent situations<sup>121</sup> (Archer 1995, Campbell 1998).

### **Between the ‘I’ and the ‘We’**

To say that ‘I’ always stands in relation to a ‘We’ can be misunderstood. It is a claim that can be found in Crossley (2011), as just one example of a much broader tradition of social thought (much of it sharing the Meadian origins of Crossley’s contribution to the literature). It also finds philosophical expression in Taylor’s critique of atomistic social ontologies, in which he describes the webs of interlocution within which subjects are embedded. From the perspective advocated in this thesis, the latter is the less problematic of the two positions, though it is by no

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<sup>121</sup> This claim is elaborated upon in the critique of Crossley (2001, 2005, 2011) below.



means unproblematic. The difficulty both accounts share is a failure to recognise the relative autonomy of the “I” and the “We”; an absence which we can explain in Taylor's case by reference to the particular level of abstraction at which he is working but which for Crossley is indicative of more underlying difficulties.

One cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding – and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call ‘webs of interlocution’. It is this original situation which gives its sense to our concept of ‘identity’, offering an answer to the question of who I am through a definition of where I am speaking from and to whom. The full definition of someone's identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community. (Taylor 1989: 36).

Part of the problem with Taylor's formulation is the implication of the cohesiveness of these webs of interlocution. Though, as suggested, this can be partly explained by reference to his differing intentions, it is also redolent of the culturalist assumptions which pervade his work, in which his excessively linguistic understanding of culture as such leads him to think and write in terms of cultures as cohesive wholes<sup>122</sup>. He frequently lapses into the myth of cultural integration (Archer 1988) conflating

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<sup>122</sup> See Taylor (1994) for an insight into his work on multiculturalism. Part of the difficulty stems from the reliance within his work on an understanding of the ‘background’ (Taylor 1991). The concept serves as an important bridge between his social ontology and political philosophy.

causal relations between people with logical relations between ideas. In other words, Taylor tends to think of culture in terms of shared meanings and, in doing so, elides the coherency of the meanings with the degree to which they are shared. Regardless of the genesis and spread of this tendency within his work, which would necessitate a textual exegesis of a kind far beyond the remit of this thesis, it nonetheless finds expression at a more specific level in the notion of the web of interlocution. The risk here is that the metaphor of the 'web', even leaving aside the connotation of intention arguably carried by it, enables (empirical) synchronic coherence to foreground (actual) diachronic continuities and obscure (actual) diachronic discontinuities. In doing so, we soon lose purchase upon the real mechanisms generative of the actual continuities and discontinuities within the 'web of interlocution' over time which we observe empirically at particular points in time. The slide into actualism which, it was argued in Chapter Three, follows inevitably from the Giddensian conception of 'fateful moments' as retrospectively identified by subjects, risks being reproduced, at the level of relations rather than biography, unless we carefully elucidate at an ontological level how 'I' and 'we' relate and what engenders the transformation or reproduction of these relations over time. The relations between 'I' and 'we' are structured and an empirical treatment of this structuring over time soon entails encountering a complexity which needs to be recognised in the ontology which we (transitively) bring to bear upon our investigation.

The other difficulty with Taylor's account is its exhaustively discursive focus. As Sayer reminds us, we are who we are is a result of 'being held, loved, hurt, ignored, shamed, played with, celebrated, etc.' (Sayer 2011: 120). We are born into relations, existing in dependency upon others whom we unavoidably rely on to meet the needs we cannot. However this social dependency has natural origins because

our immediate needs arise from our biological nature<sup>123</sup>. It is through these embodied relations to the natural world that our sense of self emerges, as an incipient awareness of the body qua object amongst other objects gives way to demarcation of the body from the world, arising from the experience of it as something that is always with me and through which I can enact changes in other objects and their arrangement within my environment (Archer 2000: 118-53)<sup>124</sup>. But with these embodied natural relations comes a vulnerability and neediness which is with us throughout life, though the dependence it entails often finds cultural erasure throughout adulthood (Sayer 2011; MacIntyre 1999).

The individualistic connotations which some commentators, for instance King (2010)<sup>125</sup>, see in discussions of individual reflexivity (one person, one head, one set of thoughts) quickly dissolve when reflexivity is seen diachronically and contextually: reflexivity is relational in its development, modality, practice and breakdown (Archer 2014: 146). Approached synchronically, we begin to see collectivities (proto or otherwise) as constituted emergently through the convergence of individuals and, in turn, individuals being partly constituted through their entering into all manner of ‘we’ collectivities. In other words, cycles of personal morphogenesis interpenetrate, as represented in the diagram below, in which Px indicates any number of others who emergently constitute the ‘we’ for the person who is the main subject of analysis. This is an important point to make in response to the symbolic interactionist critiques of realist analyses of reflexivity, such as Scott

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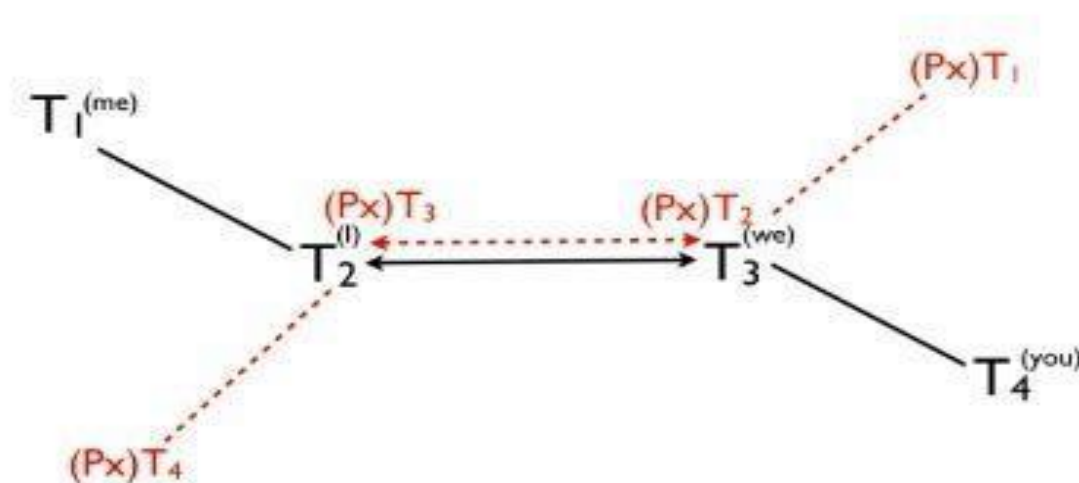
<sup>123</sup> Though of course how these needs are understood by caregivers is historically and culturally variable.

<sup>124</sup> See also Ahmed (2008) for an insightful discussion of the role of pain in individuation.

<sup>125</sup> Who manages to misread both Archer and Giddens in an article predicated on contextualising the two theorists, as well as the putative convergence between them, within the canon of British social theory. In pursuit of his preconceived point, he skips over the deceptively complex question of the relation between ‘80s Giddens’ and ‘90s Giddens’ which occupied the first chapter of this thesis.

and Dawson (2014), which criticise a focus on individual ‘being’ to the exclusion of relational ‘becoming’. The obvious relational realist retort is that explanation of the symbolic interactionist communities of reference (the theatre of relational ‘becoming’) in turn necessitates an account of individual ‘being’. The misleading dichotomy can be overcome by recognising the relational moment in the constitution of individuals and the individual moment in the constitution of relations.

Figure 2: Personal Morphogenesis and Relational Morphogenesis



It is important that we be clear about what such a relation entails. It is not a matter of standing in a relation between roles, though that in itself can be a conditioning factor shaping the morphogenesis of relations<sup>126</sup>, but rather qualitative relations which have the capacity to modify both the parties to them and the context within which they unfold (Archer 2014; Donati 2011). This ‘real relationality’ cannot be reduced to interpersonal interaction; ‘it cannot be reduced to the subjects even though it can

<sup>126</sup> In the sense that role occupancy has biographical consequences, engendering a tendency to encounter some (but not others) with certain vested interests and interpretative tendencies, within particular situated milieux. The point is that relations in the qualitative sense emerge within this context, as well as being subsequently conditioned by it, while nonetheless being irreducible to it. Relations in the sense of structured roles imply a substitutability which ‘real relationality’ lacks (Archer 2014).

only “come alive” through these subjects’ (Archer 2010b: 202). The relational goods emergent from interaction matter in Sayer’s (2011) sense to the persons concerned:

As ‘strong evaluators’ (Taylor 1985b), Ego and Alter, the members of a close family, friendship group, work team, or orchestra recognize the value of what they have generated together, which cannot be reduced to the sum of each and every contribution and often defies interpersonal substitutions. This recognition means respect, sometimes even reverence, for the relational goods generated and concern for the preservation, prolongation, and in different ways, propagation of this worth, all of which engender commitment to fostering the relationship itself. (Archer 2014: 155)

Once it is situated within a relational context, the contention that reflexivity is an individualistic concept becomes patently unsustainable<sup>127</sup>. Instead, we can see an interior aspect to reflexivity but also reflexive action in interaction (Donati 2013). When we examine an empirical ‘we’ of the sort examined in the previous two chapters, such as a family or co-residents within an university flat, the sense of the ‘we’ derives from a membership constituted through a first-person orientation to the relational goods emergent from this collectivity (Archer 2014: 154). These ‘internal goods’ (care, trust, solidarism) constitute emergent properties which are themselves generative of interdependencies at the empirical level. As Sayer (2011: 119) puts it, ‘we are emerging products of specific social relations, in which we continue to act, reproducing or transforming those relations in the process’. It is in virtue of these relational goods, or their absence, that we can explain the disposition of persons

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<sup>127</sup> See Weaver (2012) for an insightful empirical exploration of this.

towards the reproduction or transformation of these relations in which they are embedded. Any 'I' is always orientated towards the relational goods emergent from relations with a variegated 'we' and, through their action guided by their concern for these goods (or their absence), contributes to the reproduction or transformation of the relations themselves.

On such an account, we can make sense of, for instance, the closeness of Mary's family relationships in terms of a reciprocal orientation towards the relational goods generated within the family and a concern to preserve and prolong them through being a 'you' which sustains investment in this 'we'. In contrast, we can make sense of the gradual erosion of John's relations with his friends from the estate in terms of the growing absence of relational goods, as the openness and understanding grounded in overlapping milieux of estate and school ceases to be reproduced once their paths begin to part, with the friends leaving school at sixteen to start work while John entered college and then moved away to university, entailing a weakening of relational commitment. Initially, John finds himself an 'I' conditioned by a 'me' which has known and valued these friendships for a long time and, as such, remains disposed to making social arrangements with these friends when circumstances allow<sup>128</sup>. But as these interactions become decreasingly satisfying, with one of the most pronounced aspects of them being a recurrent failure for these friends to recognise his intellectual and political commitments in anything other than the most cursory way, the commitment to the preservation of these relations fades away and so, it seemed at the end of the interview period, would the disposition engendered by that judgement of the relation's worth. Without the

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<sup>128</sup> The spatiality of these circumstances, with a journey from the West Midlands to East London being necessary to spend time together, render these a geo-spatial constraint on action oriented towards sustaining the relations. Though this is a far from insurmountable factor, as the discussion of 'mediated continuity' will attempt to make clear.

relational good to mediate these interactions, all that was salient about them could be found in the interaction itself: in this case there was little that led John to seek to preserve them. In the case of both John and Mary, we can infer<sup>129</sup> processes of personal morphogenesis underway with those they are related to. In the case of the former, as his friends have now long been in work in the local area while John goes to work elsewhere, the ‘splitting’ of the ‘we’ as their own changes preclude the sustenance of relational goods as John himself heralds the morphonecrosis of the relation as incipient decay in the absence of relational commitment will ultimately tend to give way to the dissolution of the relation itself (Al-Almoudi and Latsis 2015)<sup>130</sup>. In the case of the latter, we can infer (again tentatively) a continued orientation towards the importance of the relational goods generated within the family by other members of Mary’s family, leading to a continued commitment to their sustenance on the part of other family members. In both examples, we can see the biographical entanglement represented in the previous diagram, with the constitution of the ‘we’ being shaped by the respective changes (or lack thereof) undergone by the compositional ‘I’ without which there would be no such collectivity.

The accusation that reflexivity entails individualism only holds if the individuals concerned are seen in culturally and socially dislocated terms. We can detach a cultural politics which seeks to affirm agency by respecting choices from a concern to study actual choices (Gill 2008). Once we see reflexivity in relational

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<sup>129</sup> Though speculatively given the research design did not permit empirical investigation. The question of a research design more adequate to the investigation of relational dynamics in themselves, as opposed to their conditioning influence upon biographies, remains one of many questions brought into focus by this project.

<sup>130</sup> Such a process could be tentatively forecast but not predicted in a determinist sense given the ever present possibility that contingencies intervene within an open system. All manner of events in the personal lives of John and/or his friends could potentially contribute towards a reversal of this trend towards the dissolution of the relation.

terms, it becomes difficult to sustain an objection that reflexivity is a concept with individualistic or voluntaristic connotations. As Archer (2012: 97) puts it, ‘their real relations with others also need retrieving as variable but powerful influences upon the equally variable outcomes that now constitute the lifelong socialization’ because otherwise ‘the entire concept risks drifting into an unacceptable monadism or slipping into Beck’s portrayal of subjects’ capricious and serial self-reinvention in a social context reduced to institutionalised individualism’. However in addressing the critique of reflexivity as individualistic, there is a risk of an equal but opposing objection that reflexivity often focuses ‘less on interactive and more on intra-active processes’ (Mouzelis 2007: 2.5). This concern for the ‘apophatic’ dimension of reflexivity constituted through active intra-personal engagements, usually though not exclusively for avowedly spiritual reasons (Mouzelis 2010) should not be dismissed as a preoccupation with a marginal phenomenon. The spiritual connotation of ‘apophatic reflexivity’ is resisted precisely because of the extent to which it occludes the continuity of such self-practices with ‘non-spiritual’ forms of self-engagement, such as cognitive behavioural therapy conducted either individually or with a therapist, as well as forms of sustained work on the body (e.g. weight lifting) or moral work on the character (e.g. various forms of self-tracking and behaviour modification). Treating ‘apophatic’ forms of self-engagement adequately is certainly possible within the morphogenetic framework, with the additional implication that such projects are seen in terms of the life as a whole, contextualising a turn towards inwardness in terms of the cycles of change within an individual’s life that have led them to look towards themselves in search of moral sources (Taylor 1989). Nonetheless, it is imperative that we see such projects as continuous with other



forms of engagement which are relatively self-directed. Donati draws a helpful distinction between a personal engagement and a social engagement:

For instance, in some cases a subject is self-aware that he ‘gives’ himself to his music and that this relationship is worth many sacrifices for him as an individual player; in other cases, the subject defines ‘his’ music as an engagement which must be fine-tuned with other significant actors (fellow musicians), otherwise it is not worthwhile pursuing. In the first case, we observe a personal engagement; in the second, we observe a social engagement. The latter does not mean that the subject is dependent upon the others, but simply that he wants to play his music in a certain, ‘social’ way, because his music needs this ‘sociability’. (Donati 2013: 135).

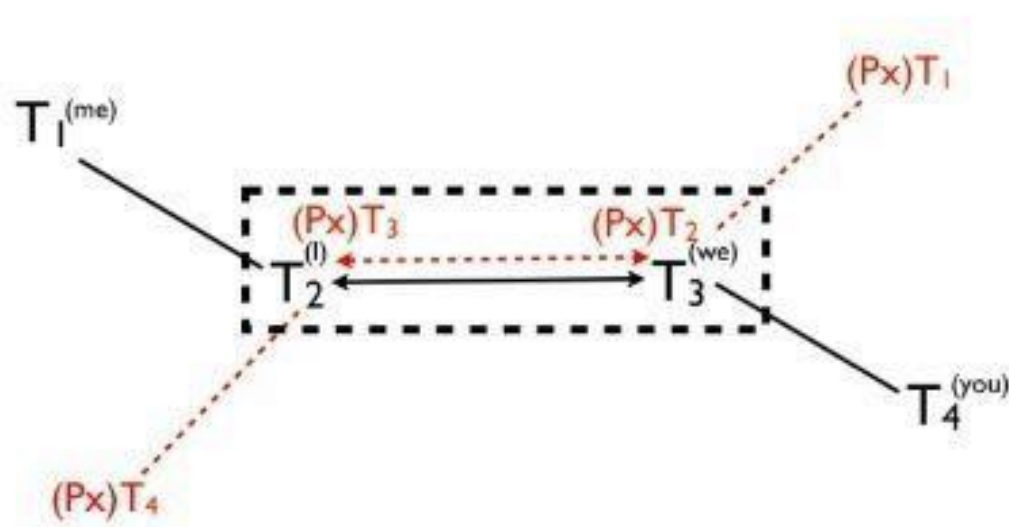
However contra Donati, we can observe that the relational configurations in which we are embedded at any given point in time not only shape the opportunity costs attached to particular courses of action but also their possibility or impossibility (Crossley 2010: 109). It is impossible to play music with fellow musicians if there are not any fellow musicians willing to play with you. This does not mean that fellow musicians have to be found in the immediate milieu of an aspiring musician to make music possible, only that the distribution of variety shapes the difficulties attendant to enacting and pursuing particular sorts of social engagements. Important consequences flow from this for both morphogenesis of persons and the morphogenesis of relations. For instance Kirsty was a regularly attendee at music festivals over the summer and, though some had attended such festivals, she was the only participant who had done so on a regular basis. Although someone could of

course attend such a festival on their own, this would be a different experience to that of Kirsty and most others. Particularly in her case, with a largely identical group of friends attending the same festival each summer (as well as ‘branching out’ into other festivals), the activity is one which would have been impossible without these friendships. The point is banal when considered as a simple descriptive statement but the implications are much more important when interrogated from a morphogenetic standpoint. What is required is not just the friends but rather the friendships i.e. the relations themselves. Certainly she would have been unable to attend with her friends if not for her friends qua individuals but the particular relations in which they stood to each other were necessary for such a shared project to emerge. Crucially, the shared activity is inevitably morphogenetic vis-à-vis the relations which were their precondition: the friendships change through the shared activity which they also facilitated. So too do the individuals concerned, as the T2-T3 of the ‘I’ and the ‘We’ for P1 within a situated milieu converges with the T2-T3 for P2 for whom P1 is part of their ‘We’.

In this sense we can talk of a particular subset of the broader ‘We’ as the enactment of a shared activity, with the prior discussion and planning it entailed, required the convergence of a substantive reference group (‘the friends I’m going to the festival with’) on the situated milieu of the festival site. To unpack the shared experience, we can conceive of a morphogenetic sequence at the personal level for each participant where ‘I’ primarily interacts with ‘We’ who are attending the festival and, through these interactions, change in a way which equally contributes to the changes of others because of my participation in their ‘We’. In doing so ‘We’ change qua friendship group but in a way irreducible to the changes of the individual members. So we can analytically distinguish (1) the morphogenetic sequences for

each of the persons involved (2) the relational morphogenesis entailed by the personal morphogenesis of those related (3) the situated milieux which, contingently though significantly, constitutes a site for the interaction which acts morphogenetically vis-à-vis these relations and the persons so related.

Figure 3: Personal Morphogenesis and Relational Morphogenesis in a Situated Milieu



However it is crucial that we do not construe the ‘We’ as anything other than a particular subset of a broader relational configuration. For any or all of the friends attending the festival together, particular individual(s) might factor into their ‘We’ and contribute to their personal morphogenesis through absence e.g. an absent friend who had hoped to attend but couldn’t afford the cost of a ticket. But exactly how their absence figures into the ‘We’ for any particular ‘I’ is biographically dependent. The absent friend may be the partner of one of those in attendance who, in turn, misses them intensely. While for the others, their absence might simply be an occasion for sporadic regret or even something which only manifests itself through the occasionally mooney behaviour of the partner in attendance. Similarly, the ‘We’

can be expanded within the situated milieu of the festival site, as chance encounters can prove deeply significant (for some or all of the friends in attendance) and new relations can be forged which persist beyond the boundaries of the event itself.

Invoking the example of a festival site is intended to illustrate that a milieu, in the sense invoked thus far in the thesis, can be discretely bounded and distinctly fleeting in a temporal sense<sup>131</sup>. The notion of ‘milieu’ is intended to help unpack the nature of ‘context’ as addressed in Archer (2003, 2007, 2012). The latter concept has been used in view of its neutrality, with the intended point being that ‘people are necessarily reflexive about their “context” or “circumstances” when they ask themselves quotidian questions (in internal or external conversation)’ (Archer 2014: 145). In beginning to introduce the spatiality of such contexts, the intention has been to foreground their particular characteristics and the role they play in shaping the form and content of reflexivity<sup>132</sup>. What has been particularly important to understand is the way that the internal structuring of the ‘we’ unfolds across milieux, with much of the dilemma attached to the necessity of selection for the students in the case study ensuing from the challenge posed by (in most cases) sustaining a network of relations across multiple milieux.

Such considerations serve to underscore the importance that the biographical and the relational are clearly distinguished as analytical frames of reference. This is the possibility which we forfeit in those accounts, labelled ‘relationalist’ by Donati (2011), whose preoccupation with transaction excludes the reality of the relation

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<sup>131</sup> The example is an evocative one if we consider that festival sites are not equivalent to the fields in which they are hosted. They are constructed prior to the festival and deconstructed following it, with a great logistical operation being undertaken in many cases to convert the site back to another use for the rest of the year.

<sup>132</sup> One striking, though perhaps unsurprising, empirical finding was the extent to which all the participants who moved from halls of residence into off-campus accommodation were forced to deliberately negotiate all manner of quotidian issues ensuing from the spatial arrangement of their accommodation vis-à-vis the campus

itself. For instance Crossley (2010) recognises emergent properties of interaction in his insightful and sophisticated account but these are conceptualised entirely in terms of the interaction itself. So he accepts emergent properties which ‘act back upon actors such that the latter are as much products of interaction as producers of it’ (Crossley 2010: 103) but these are construed as properties of the interaction itself rather than a relation transformed or reproduced through interaction. The focus of his account is on the T2-T3 of the morphogenetic sequence as actors both shape and are shaped by their interaction in relation to one another.

In his discussion of exchange theory, Crossley argues that ‘there must be some purpose to interaction, something rewarding about it, otherwise it is either a random and inexplicable happening or the caused effect of something preceding it’ (Crossley 2010: 122). Unless relations are conceptualised as an emergent kind, rather than simply in terms of emergent properties of interactions, Crossley’s theoretical move is an understandable one. It allows him to explain interaction as purposive in a way that avoids the invocation of deontology or contingency as underwriting empirically observable reciprocity. Acknowledging that an antipathy towards exchange theory often rests on the perception that it explains away sociability in utilitarian terms, he instead offers a minimalistic reading of ‘exchange’ which simply stresses the element of ‘attraction’, broadly construed, in human interaction. But in correctly construing interaction as being driven in most cases by the parties to it wanting to interact, his prior ontological commitments entail that the ‘very fact of “attraction” suggests “reward” and thus exchange’ such that ‘to be attractive to another is to have something to offer them’ (Crossley 2010: 113). What’s missing here is some reality over and above that of interpersonal relations, namely those ‘irreducible properties arising from the reciprocal orientation of those involved’

which mean that relations ‘cannot be reduced to the subjects even though it can only “come alive” through these subjects’ (Archer 2010: 202). What Crossley conceptualises as exchange, emergent from an ‘attraction’ which underwrites the reciprocal orientation of the friends, can instead be understood as an orientation to the relation of friendship itself and the ‘relational goods’ emergent from it:

As in the paradigm case of friendship, it belongs to neither of the friends but is shared and valued by both. Each orientates themselves to the maintenance of this emergent ‘relational good’ (for example, by patching up a quarrel or keeping friendship in good repair); this reciprocal orientation becoming the source of collective intentionality in larger groups. Relational goods are generated from relationships linking those involved and are wholly reliant on the endurance of their bonding. Hence, no one can take away part of the orchestra or the football game as their personal possession and by taking themselves off they destroy the generative mechanism producing these very goods (Archer 2010: 202-3).

This is what Crossley’s account struggles to account for. His failure to accord relations a reality beyond the powers emergent from interaction leaves it embroiled in actualism, failing to recognise the relative autonomy of either biographies or relations and thus centrally conflating the two (Archer 1995). On Crossley’s account ‘actors build a sense of “me” through a historical reconstruction of scenes, dramas or sequences of events in which they have been involved’ such that ‘the me is a character in a story told by the I’ (Crossley 2010: 94). This unavoidably leads to a proliferation of identity narratives given the diverse range of relations within which a

given individual is embedded. Given his affirmation of human agency, this raises the question of what could ‘pull the various aspects of the individual’s life, their diverse roles or identities, together, reconciling their competing commitments, identities and the demands made upon them’. But narrative is again invoked to fulfil this role and what trans-narratological unity of a life Crossley accepts amounts simply to the ‘meta-identity’ understood to emerge from ‘switching’ between different ‘situated identities’ because ‘switching relativizes situated identities for the actor and distances her from them, generating a higher-level story of a “me” which pre-exists and performs them’ (Crossley 2010: 94). There is a homology here between Crossley’s lack of a concept of biography (beyond narrative) and Crossley’s lack of a concept of relation (beyond iterated interaction). It leaves him mired in actualism and unable to move beyond the T2 to T3 of the morphogenesis of either persons or relations. He has no way of accounting for the ‘inputs’ to or the ‘outputs’ from interactive processes because he lacks a durable concept of either relations or biographies. In their absence, each is made to depend on the other, constituting a specifically relational form of central conflation (Archer 2014: 160)<sup>133</sup>. The ‘you’ constituted by Crossley’s ‘meta-identity’ is left as peculiarly transcendental given the broader direction of Crossley’s theoretical stance (Crossley 2001a, 2006). His central conflationism leaves him unable to provide purchase upon a theoretical postulate which animates his project,

I believe that individual human agents fully become who and what they are through immersion in social practices and social relations. The isolated individual is a myth. This is not the determinant of individuality and

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<sup>133</sup> The notion of conflation was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. See Archer (1995) for a full discussion.

autonomy. Rather, it is a prerequisite of both. We become ‘individual’, in any meaningful sense of the term, and we become ‘autonomous’, as a consequence of the transformative experience, which begins at the moment of birth, of involvement in social relations and practices. This presupposes that we are ‘something’ at birth; that we are born with both generic capacities/potential and individually variable dispositions. We are not blank slates. But what we are by birth is a far cry from the autonomous individual celebrated in contemporary Western societies, and in so far as we ever approximate that ideal we do so by virtue of our involvement in collective life. (Crossley 2006: 4)

On one level, this account is uncontentious from a realist perspective. The problem arises because of the manner in which Crossley’s theoretical framework systematically precludes the possibility of gaining traction upon the emergent processes arising from these interdependencies. Crossley has been a fruitful theoretical foil in elaborating this approach because of his closeness to it in some respects: he recognises the primacy of practice, emergent properties and the relative autonomy of emergent strata (Crossley 2006, 2011). The difficulty stems from his conceptualisation of practice in entirely social terms, such that ‘both pre-reflective and reflective modes of action’ are seen to be ‘equally rooted in habit’ (Crossley 2001b: 117). In spite of his creative deployment of Schutz and Merleau-Ponty in a phenomenological reframing of Bourdieu<sup>134</sup> orientated towards accounting for the purported generativity of habitus and the ‘mysterious’ status of reflexivity within Bourdieu’s oeuvre (Crossley 2001b) the origins of dispositionality are still

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<sup>134</sup> A more interesting version of the move undertaken by Atkinson (2010) who has been addressed at various points in previous chapters.



conceptualised in terms of an all-encompassing social order which dissolves practical relations into social ones (Archer 2000; Campbell 1996). In spite of Crossley's affirmation of reflexivity, there simply isn't the distance between self and society which is necessary for it. Self and other(s) are compacted together in serial transactions (Archer 2014; Donati 2011) with what subjectivity transcends the situation being a ghostly narrativising 'I' drawing together the disparate stories which have emerged from my disparate interactions. In affirming the interdependence of 'I' and 'we' Crossley prevents us from actually examining how particular persons shape each other over time.

## **The Future 'You'**

The account thus far says little about the possibilities of the future 'you'. To what extent can I reconstitute myself (the future 'you') through my action in the present tense? Bhaskar's (1989) critique of Rorty's account of personal morphogenesis<sup>135</sup> is instructive in this respect. The object of his critique is Rorty's exclusive focus upon redescription as the locus of personal change, in which 'notions of metaphor and self-creation' come to replace those of 'truth, rationality, and moral obligation' (Rorty 1989: 44). On this view, individuation is something which is achieved, with the 'always incomplete' person becoming who they are through engagement, sometimes poetic, with the 'web of relations, a web which time lengthens every day'

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<sup>135</sup> Obviously Rorty did not understand his project under such a description. But he indisputably sought to understand human self-transformation, as have many other others, both within philosophy and far beyond it. In the spirit of the 'bridge-building' sociological theory of Mouzelis (1995) it is valuable to try and incorporate these disparate projects into a shared frame of reference given their convergent concerns (in spite of radically different vocabularies and starting points). Only then can we begin to gain some durable traction on the core issues underlying these diverse inquiries.

and the possibilities it affords for ‘reweaving’ (Rorty 1989: 42-3)<sup>136</sup>. But who is the weaver? Bhaskar adroitly unpicks the different degrees of freedom encountered in Rorty’s account: freedom as ‘caprice, discourse, capricious discourse and creative discourse’ (Bhaskar 1989: 173). Despite his disavowal of both realism and anti-realism<sup>137</sup>, as well as his tendency towards political interventions of a left-leaning sort<sup>138</sup>, he ultimately presents us with a view of freedom detached from material constraints and enablements. As Bhaskar observes, ‘it is now easy to see how the notion that “man is always free to choose new descriptions” can encourage the voluntaristic position that man is always free to choose any description’ (Bhaskar 1989: 176). The problem here is not the notion of redescription per se, rather the absence of any context, either personal (the irrevocably unfolding life course) or social (enduring social structures which cannot be redescribed or wished away). We may always be able to redescribe our future ‘you’ but we do so in a way bound by accumulated propensities and capacities, conditioned by the networks of relations within which we are embedded and deploying the ideational resources which are situationally accessible to us.

Recognising the interpretative freedom we undoubtedly do enjoy must be allied with recognition of how the exercise of that freedom is conditioned by circumstances if we are to avoid voluntarism. This is particularly obvious when considered developmentally. As MacIntyre (1999) observes, ‘children can be provided with too constrained and impoverished a view of possibilities’. As well as

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<sup>136</sup> The similarity to Taylor’s (1989) notion of ‘webs of interlocution’ is striking. The metaphor of the ‘web’ recurs throughout discussions of relationality, with all the problems it entails. Who is the weaver?

<sup>137</sup> See Rorty (1991) for more on his project of getting ‘beyond realism and anti-realism’.

<sup>138</sup> See Rorty (1991). Gross (2009) contains a number of interesting discussions about the formative influence of Rorty’s parents upon his later political writing. The ambivalent relationship between Rorty’s concern with material inequalities and his own practical preoccupation with the future of the academic left reflects the ambivalence of his thought more broadly.

the material opportunity costs attendant to our involuntary placement as primary agents, our understanding of the kinds of persons it is possible for us to become is filtered through the 'we' which unfolds within the natal context. As well as direct normative influence which leads to the consideration of possible selves (e.g. 'you will be X when you grow up') 'future representations of the self' can be elaborated, with varying degrees of subjective ingenuity required, from all manner of normative influences and cultural representations encountered within the natal environment. Possible selves, whether desirable or not, elaborated or not, 'play both a cognitive and an affective role in motivation, influencing expectations by facilitating a belief that some selves are possible whereas others are not'. In doing so, they constitute an 'incentive for future behaviour, providing clear goals to facilitate the achievement of a desired future self or avoidance of a negative one' (Stevenson and Clegg 2012: 19).

## **Becoming Who We Are**

This chapter has drawn together the theoretical strands developed in the opening chapters of this thesis and elaborated upon through the empirical case study. The intention has been to offer a theory of personal morphogenesis which goes beyond attempts to offer cognitive micro-foundations for sociology (Lizardo 2009) to instead integrate change at the personal level into an analytical framework orientated towards the analysis of change at the level of agency, culture and structure (Archer 2013c). To this end, three relations have been discussed through which the elaboration of personhood unfolds:

1. The conditioning 'me' → the present 'I'

2. The present 'I'  $\leftrightarrow$  the related 'we'
3. The elaborating 'I'  $\rightarrow$  the future 'you'.

These three relations operate over three distinct time horizons; the conditioned 'Me' constrains and enables the 'I', which interacts and intra-acts in relation to a present 'We' contributing to the shaping of a future 'You'. As Laing once put it, 'our relatedness to others is an essential part of our being...but any particular person is not a necessary part of our being' (Laing 2010: 26). Delineating t

hese relations and their distinctive time horizons allow us to recognise this relational essence to our personhood without dissolving *who we are* into *who we are related to*. It preserves the relative autonomy of the 'I' in relation to the 'We' and, through doing so, allows us to retain purchase upon how relations shape persons who, in turn, contribute to the shaping of future relations.

Psychobiography encompasses both being and becoming because the two cannot ultimately be detached. Our psychobiography emerges 'as we all journey — always necessarily — through the arrow of time of our life course' (Uprichard 2008: 307) and it is something that occupies our deliberations, under our own descriptions, as we become fallibly aware of journey(s) extending from the past through the present and into the future (Alford 1995). These temporal horizons of personhood are understood through culture but, we should remember, we have no grounds for assuming the congruence of cultural ideas with social practice (Archer 1988) and doing so obscures important questions concerning the reflexive mediation of culture<sup>139</sup>. Furthermore, while concepts of 'childhood', 'adolescent' and 'adulthood'

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<sup>139</sup> See the argument in Chapter Two

(to name but three) are clearly culturally constructed and historically variable, we must avoid mistaking the concept of 'childhood' for being a child (Uprichard 2008: 309) while nonetheless retaining an awareness of how the former can causally condition the latter. The analytical framework is intended to 'open up' these questions, which are so frequently dissolved, sensitising the analyst to the different modalities through which conditioning influences operate: shaping the propensities of the person as a result of past experience (Me), their present capacities and liabilities in relation to others who act in virtue of this relation ( $I \leftarrow \rightarrow We$ ) and the possible person they will become (You). This is not a substantive theory per se but rather a framework which helps isolate different phases of personal change, bridging the gap between static ontologies of being (T1 and T4) and processual ontologies of becoming (T2 and T3) by incorporating both into one overarching frame of reference. Its utility rests on identifying the cycles of personal morphogenesis or personal morphostasis which, through their linked operation over the lifecourse, endow the emergent psychobiography with its particular characteristics: at any moment in time I am this person who has become so through this life that I have led.

Much more could be said about these relations than has been here. The task of this chapter has been to offer an explicit formulation of the framework developed through the empirical case study. It is intended as an analytical scheme to facilitate the analysis of personal morphogenesis rather than a substantive theory of how people become who they are. Any such theory must be informed by substantive analysis of this process itself and, as this thesis as a whole has contended, this is an aspect of human life which has been pervasively misunderstood and misdescribed within sociology.

## Conclusion

What is a person? What is it like to be a person now? These were the questions that motivated this thesis but they are not ones that have been directly answered by it. My own intellectual trajectory from the philosophy of Alisdair MacIntyre (1984, 1999) and Charles Taylor (1985, 1989) through to the social theory of Bauman (1991, 1997, 2000, 2001) and Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) before ultimately arriving at the relational realism of Archer (2000, 2003, 2007, 2012) and Donati (2010, 2013) has tracked the recalcitrance of these questions. In particular, I found Bauman's oeuvre gripping at one time, though ultimately dissatisfying; this thesis began as a project to interrogate that dissatisfaction, using the analytical tools of critical realism to better understand what it was that fascinated me about this work yet ultimately disappointed me. The conclusion I soon drew was that the question itself is problematic. What is it like to be a person now? This is an empirical question asked at a level of generality which precludes an empirical answer.

In the first chapter I argued that the promise and problems of this body of work<sup>140</sup>, some of which is coming to seem strikingly dated in a post-crash world where history has returned with a vengeance (Callinicos 2013, Žižek 2009), both arise from this generality. Panoramic visions of epochal change are quickly undermined by a tendency towards vacuous generality when the attempt is made to render these claims in a concrete fashion. The point of this observation has not been to reject such work out of hand, though many would argue it represents a retrograde movement for social theory, representing a proclivity towards dramatisation devoid of systematicity (C. Turner 2010: 84). Instead, the intention has been to draw

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<sup>140</sup> Which Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) was taken as an exemplar of for practical purposes, though without this imputing a homogeneity to the literature concerned.

attention to the importance of this now canonical body of work (Outhwaite 2009) and the need this entails that we better understand its deficiencies. These, I have argued, stem from an underlying failure to adequately theorise reflexivity and, through this analysis, it was argued that accounting for social change necessitates accounting for personal change. The second chapter introduced the work of Margaret Archer (2000, 2003, 2007) on reflexivity, arguing that her notion of the internal conversation as a mediatory mechanism helps open up the space which other approaches tend to shut down (Archer 1995, Mouzelis 1995). However, as she herself has recognised (Archer 2012), this focus upon reflexivity risks monadism unless we retrieve the causal influence of relations upon the exercise of reflexivity as persons make their way through the world. This was then followed by an exploration of the role played by ideas in shaping the practice of reflexivity, something which remains undertheorised within this body of work. The third chapter introduced the biographical dimensions with which we must engage in order to understand the unavoidably temporal process of personal change, critiquing existing approaches and illustrating the need for a concept of personal change to gain traction upon the mechanisms generative of biographical elaboration.

These three chapters collectively sought to recast the underlying question. If we are motivated to understand 'the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world' (Mills 2000: 4) then how we conceptualise this 'interplay' becomes a matter of the utmost importance. This in turn poses questions about 'man', 'biography' and 'self' which have proved elusive throughout the history of sociological thought. What is stake is not only the person but how the properties and

powers of the person operate over time in relation to structure, culture and agency<sup>141</sup>. This is what the analytical framework of ‘personal morphogenesis’ is intended to offer: a means of gaining traction upon the different modalities through which people change and the time horizons over which they operate, as well as the interplay between causal factors generative of this change. The empirical case study was a means to elaborate this account, utilised to refine the concepts introduced in the first section into a framework for the analysis of how people change over time. Its aim is to help elucidate the variable influence of different factors upon biographical elaboration without abstracting away from the lived life of the person in question, in doing so clarifying the role played by the individual in sociological explanation.

However the risk remains that talk about individuals is taken to entail individualism. The assumption underlying such a judgement has retained significant traction within sociology, partly because of the boundary disputes with psychology which have defined its elaboration as a discipline (Layder 1997: 51). The individual remains a contested category within sociological thought, ensnared within a broader network of theoretical disputes originating in disciplinary boundaries which often hinder attempts to bring the assumptions underlying treatments of the individual into plain sight (Sayer 2011: 14). This thesis has made no attempt to address these underlying issues within sociological theory, though as a research project it did emerge first and foremost from a (philosophical) engagement with such questions.

It has proceeded on the understanding that the everyday lives of concrete individuals encompass exterior and interior dialogues (Chalari 2009). While the former might seem unproblematic for sociological inquiry, many doubts will tend to

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<sup>141</sup> With the personal in this sense constituting a dimension of agency, given primary agents and corporate agents are composed of persons, shaping them but also being shaped by them.



be raised about the latter, either because of the entrenched scepticism about ‘thinking’ within sociology (Swedberg 2011) or a broader theoretical movement which seeks to explain away ‘interiority’ itself. This latter view takes aim at the ‘Cartesian notion of ideas as appearances on the stage of an inner theatre’ (Rorty 2007: 163) and contests that ‘to have a mind is not to have a movie theatre inside the skull, with successive representations of the surroundings flashing on the screen’ (Rorty 2007: 113). However if we take the ‘inner eye’ out of introspection, substituting internal conversation for inner observation, then the force of the critique immediately begins to wane (Archer 2003: 21-33). Though its broader ambitions have precluded an extended excursion in the history of ideas, the present project has been animated by a conviction that this over-caution about interiority is not just philosophically mistaken, it is a severely deleterious meta-theoretical influence upon sociological research more broadly. This territory has been ceded to psychology and, in doing so, the possible contribution of sociology to our understanding of reflexivity has been foreclosed. The variability of the subject-object relationship (Mouzelis 2008) manifests itself empirically, temporally and socially, with the ramifications of the former likely to be obscured in the absence of the latter. Unless we draw conceptual distinctions between the capacity for reflexivity, the modalities through which it can operate and the trajectories of social action tending to ensue from them, we will be left imputing a false homogeneity to internal life which is more an artefact of disciplinary divisions than a reflective judgement.

The risk inherent in this line of argument is that it engenders a facile dissolution of disciplinary boundaries, encouraging amateur speculation (Mouzelis 1995) in lieu of sustained dialogues which draw on disciplinary traditions as resources (MacIntyre 1984). Nonetheless, this thesis began at the intersection

between philosophy and sociology and it ends at the interface between psychology and sociology. Sociologists have tended to be uninterested in the origin of the capacities drawn upon in social interaction (Sayer 2011: 118). Psychologists have tended to impute a universalism to reflexivity and to reinforce this assumption through experimental design (Archer 2003: 153). Both these trends reflect the extent to which reflexivity, as an individual capacity which operates intra-actively and inter-actively, has been squeezed out by disciplinary boundary drawing. Unfortunately the specificity of reflexivity is obliterated by its confinement to individual psychology (intra-active) or its absorption into social psychology (interactive) (Archer 2003: 64). This obscures the origins of subject-object variability and, in doing so, leaves its empirical manifestation either explained away or unexplained. For instance Arnett's (2004) influential study of the biographical extension of the transition between adolescence and adulthood in the United States addressed many of the themes explored in the empirical case study attached to the present project<sup>142</sup>. However the category of 'emerging adults' remained undifferentiated, and consequentially the empirical variation within it resisted further explanation. Yet many of the differences which registered empirically are deeply susceptible to conceptual inquiry in terms of modes of reflexivity and personal morphogenesis:

1. Emerging adults who 'meander or drift through various jobs' rather than 'exploring their options in a systematic way' (Arnett 2004: 151).
2. Emerging adults who are 'satisfied with a job which is not identity-based' versus the putative majority for whom this is imperative (Arnett 2004: 155).

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<sup>142</sup> See also Smith (2011).

3. Emerging adults who are ‘willing to take a job that happens to come along through personal connections because they have set their sights low and are not very ambitious, but are happy with a job that pays decently and is reasonably pleasant’ (Arnett 2004: 154) versus those who insist on ‘finding the right identity fit’ and/or ‘the right match between a job and their interests and abilities’ (Arnett 2004: 157)
4. Emerging adults who have longstanding dreams about their occupations versus those ‘who are dreamless, who have already, at a relatively young age, nearly given hope of finding fulfilling work that will be the basis of a satisfying life’ (Arnett 2004: 158).

These are a small number of examples taken from one thematic section of a single study. They are not offered with critical intent but rather to signpost the potential value which the approach elaborated in this thesis, as well as the broader body of work upon which it builds, offers to existing research programmes. Firstly, it offers a way to conceptually unpack the empirical variation identifiable within a category such as ‘emerging adults’ and, through doing so, generates further questions which deepen the inquiry at hand. Secondly, it offers conceptual resources to address these further questions in a way conducive to drawing out the connections between the micro, meso and macro levels. Thirdly, it draws out these connections in a way which offers causal explanations of lived experience without abstracting from the meaning of that experience or the force of that meaning (Sayer 2011).

Obviously any PhD thesis is limited in its scope. In the case of the present project, such limitations were encountered both at the level of theoretical inquiry and empirical research. In terms of the former, certain lines of argument were

unavoidably truncated to facilitate their inclusion. In terms of the latter, the intensely idiographic method of analysis combined with the practical constraints of the sampling to produce an undoubted limitation of scope which would constitute a likely objection to the project from some quarters. On one level, such objections would misunderstand the purpose of such a ‘theoretico-empirical study’ which provides ‘food for further theoretical consideration’ between ‘unregulated speculation and theoretical propositions warranted by empirical substantiation’ (Archer 2012: 293). The present project was always intended a work of sociological theory, with a case study offering a framework through which the underlying theoretical and methodological concerns could be elaborated and refined. In doing so, the hope was that it would offer ‘an illustrative model to guide practitioners’ while also providing the basis through which a ‘toolkit of concepts’ could be developed. However this point does not deflect from methodological criticism of the limited scope of the ensuing empirical findings, as opposed to making clear that there was never any expectation that these could be anything other than limited. In particular the sampling limitations were addressed in Chapter Four and there is little to be gained by reiterating these concerns here. Furthermore, the question of a research design more adequate to the investigation of relational dynamics in themselves, as opposed to their conditioning influence upon biographies, remains one of many questions brought into focus by this project.

How we become who we are is an inherently elusive question, traversing disciplinary boundaries in a manner which inevitably inculcates a tendency to parse the question in a restricted and restrictive way. The notion of personal morphogenesis offers a framework through which it can be addressed, using a series of interlinked sensitising concepts to help tease out the different moments of

personal change and the interplay of factors generative of them. This has been addressed towards primarily sociological concerns, following from a critical engagement with the literature on late modernity which illustrated the need for sociological theory to provide more adequate resources for theorising and studying processes of personal change. However the impulse underlying it is post-disciplinary, in Sayer's (2011: 14) sense, seeking to open up a conceptual space within which insights from a range of disciplines *can* be deployed synthetically to elucidate a process which is usually only inquired into in a partial fashion.

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